Stony Brook University

Improvising in the Writing Classroom: How Improvisational Acting Transforms

Invention in Social and Collaborative Contexts

A Dissertation Presented

by

Lauren Esposito

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Stony Brook University

December 2014

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Lauren Esposito

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the

Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this dissertation.

Patricia A. Dunn – Dissertation Advisor
Associate Professor, English

Ken Lindblom – Chairperson of Defense
Associate Professor, English

Eugene Hammond– Third Reader
Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric

Bump Halbritter – Outside Reader
Associate Professor, Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, Michigan State University

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

Improvising in the Writing Classroom: How Improvisational Acting Transforms

Invention in Social and Collaborative Contexts

by

Lauren Esposito

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Stony Brook University

2014

When mapped onto writing classrooms, improvisational acting provides students with an emphasis on communal ways of knowing that are not restricted to print alone. Improvisational theater promotes the use of multiple literacies, such as kinesthetic, visual, spatial, and aural intelligences, which supplement conventional print-based strategies in writing instruction. Through speaking, listening, and moving, students collectively produce a text—an improvised performance—that stems from the spontaneous interactions and multiple perspectives of an ensemble. In "Improvising in the Writing Classroom: How Improvisational Acting Transforms Invention in Social and Collaborative Contexts," I argue that employing improv techniques and principles in writing pedagogies advances a perspective of invention that more closely resembles ancient rhetorical theories, which underscored communal knowledge. By tapping into social and collaborative forms of invention, improvisational acting enhances students' abilities to generate ideas, investigate alternative viewpoints, and examine new arguments through dramatic enactment. In this project, I draw upon research in fields in and outside of Composition Studies as well as my own research study, approved by Stony Brook University's Institutional Review Board. In the fall of 2012, I conducted a classroom-sized study with undergraduates in Stony Brook's WRT 102 course. I adapted several improv exercises and a role-play to meet the objectives of a persuasive writing assignment. The results of my study offer a real-world illustration of how writing instructors might incorporate improvisation into composition classrooms to raise students' awareness of audience and their knowledge of rhetoric. I offer detailed findings from student interviews and a comparative analysis of students' texts, written before and after their participation in improvisation. Overall, I argue that students' revised writing reflects a heightened awareness of audience in the new rhetorical choices they made in their second drafts. While this study highlights one particular instance in which students

employed improvisational acting, it suggests ways in which instructors might take greater advantage of this method to help students more effectively engage with invention. I offer recommendations for creating a classroom environment that engages students and teachers with improvisation and that provides various opportunities to integrate improv, including some that are linked to a specific writing assignment and others that are not. Constructing this type of space helps students and teachers practice the principles and structures of improv while fostering an openness to taking creative risks, experimenting with new ideas, and examining multiple perspectives in new ways.

Dedication Page

This dissertation would not be possible without the collaborative input of many important people. I would like to first thank the teachers and mentors that have helped shape this project and have contributed to my development as a teacher, researcher, and writer: Dr. Patricia A. Dunn for her unwavering support and keen insight; Dr. Ken Lindblom for his continued encouragement, mentorship, and valuable advice; Dr. Gene Hammond for supporting this project with helpful feedback and for giving me the chance to teach first-year writing students at SBU; and Dr. Bump Halbritter for his helpful critique of my project.

I would also like to pay tribute to the players of Renegade Improv, who have taught me that the best way to tap into my creative, spontaneous imagination in any situation is to start by saying "Yes, and."

I am very lucky to have also been supported by wonderful family members and friends. I would like to offer a special thank you to two fellow graduate students without whom my completion of this degree would not be possible: Nicole Galante and Kimberly Cox. Their contribution to my success is immeasurable and will be felt for years to come.

Table of Contents

List of Appendices

Introduction:

All writers face the challenge of getting started. Some are more adept at handling it than others, but most writers at one time or another have struggled to generate material to write about. Student writers are no different. They enter our classes having confronted similar difficulties with invention, the canon of rhetoric that focuses specifically on how writers and speakers generate ideas and discover what it is they want to say. We often respond by providing strategies and heuristics that aid with invention and that take the form of written outlines, lists, idea webs and clusters, charts, and freewriting. Rarely, though, are students asked to employ more interactive and dynamic invention strategies that get them out of their seats and collaborating with each other by speaking, acting, and moving. Having students invent by using performance-based methods, such as improvisation and role-play, can open their minds to new insights and creative possibilities they might not discover otherwise. It exposes them to new ways of thinking that are visual, aural, kinesthetic, and spatial and that stimulate idea generation by tapping into other intellectual processes in addition to writing.

In this dissertation, I argue for greater use of these methods that can expand students' repertoire of strategies while deepening their knowledge of invention, audience, and writing process. We should take advantage of multimodal, performance-based approaches, specifically improvisational acting, to supplement conventional writing process strategies with new, less familiar practices that emphasize spontaneity, creative thinking, and collaboration. While improvisational acting, or improv, may seem far removed from college writing courses, it is more compatible with our teaching than we might think. When we ask students to invent, we

essentially ask them to improvise. We ask them to think off the cuff, brainstorm, generate ideas

spontaneously, and record whatever comes to mind without yet worrying about editing,

proofreading, or revising. We encourage students to invent by taking creative risks, trying new

approaches, and experimenting with the uncertainty and chaos that typically accompany, but can

also aid, discovery. These objectives parallel underlying principles in improvisation that, when

explored in a writing classroom, stand to both reinforce and transform our purposes and

strategies for teaching invention. In improvisational theater, actors must learn to take creative

risks and accept the uncertainty that comes from working without a script or director. They must

learn to generate ideas for characters and stories by creating dialogue collaboratively on the spot,

integrating the perspectives of others to construct a dramatic scene. Students have the

opportunity to learn similar lessons about invention by performing and discussing improv

techniques and principles, which invite students to accept and build upon the ideas and

viewpoints of others. Performing improv offers students a framework for entering into new

conversations and arguments with an emphasis on multiple perspectives, audience awareness,

and communally-developed knowledge. It can also bolster students' confidence with writing.

Improv gives students with strengths in non-verbal modes of communication a chance to offer

their ideas to benefit everyone, while challenging those with strong linguistic abilities to gain

insights by thinking and communicating in new ways.

Discovering Improv

The appeal of improv for many actors is the promise of creating something from nothing,

of inventing material on the spot without a predetermined script. I first became interested in the

creative possibilities of unscripted performance in the summer of 2009 when I registered for a

class offered by Stony Brook University's Craft Center.[1] While the class was advertised as a

non-credit workshop in public-speaking, it drew from improv as the basis for instruction. Each

week I worked with a group of adult professionals looking to strengthen their communication

skills by giving better presentations at meetings and other speaking engagements at their jobs. I,

on the other hand, wanted to learn improvisational acting, which I had never done before. In

fact, I had little experience with acting in general, outside of a fifth-grade variety show and the

occasional school concert. I had rarely even seen improv shows besides watching the sketch

comedy series *Saturday Night Live*, which showed me the humor in improv comedy, but kept its

inner workings a secret. It wasn't long, though, before I became enamored with improv. As the

class progressed, I marveled at how a group of near strangers without much experience in improv

could learn to invent together, produce improvised scenes, perform improv games, and use their

bodies and voices to craft uniquely drawn characters and scenarios. Fueled by this experience, I

registered for the class a second time during the following fall semester. This time the class was

designed explicitly to teach the principles and techniques of improv, which solidified my desire

to perform. By the end of the class, I had joined several of my classmates and our instructor to

form our own improv troupe. From there, we performed together for three years, acting in

various theaters and events on Long Island, working with different improv coaches, and

attending improv shows in New York City to watch and learn from other improv troupes.

Performing improv opened my mind to new creative processes of discovery, but more

importantly, to the possibilities of introducing students to the rewards and challenges of

inventing through improv. I first began incorporating improvisation exercises into first-year

---

[1] I want to pay special tribute to Nick Lastorka, my first improv teacher, coach, and friend. Nick taught me the foundation of everything I needed to know about improv. He not only introduced me to this style of performing, but allowed me to see its significance in almost every aspect of my life. Most importantly, he was an amazing friend and left the world too soon when he passed away in January 2012. He gave me the gift of improv and I am grateful for the time spent with him. His memory lives on in the work I do.

writing courses to help students explore new ideas, contribute their talents and abilities in a communal environment, and develop the confidence to experiment with new perspectives with others. Based on my experience as an improv performer and writing teacher, I learned that helping students invent through improv not only exposed them to new intellectual processes, but provided opportunities for collaborative and social forms of invention, especially since invention in improv depends largely on collaboration for two key reasons. First, improv actors invent within a community and must rely on each other to build the dialogue and content of a performance as it is happening. Without a script to dictate dialogue or offer clues as to how performers should interact verbally and physically, improv actors cannot know beforehand how a scene will play out. To be successful, they must recognize that each player contributes a different perspective and possesses a creative power to offer, shape, and convey meaning that will be used to establish a dramatic context on stage. When improv actors try to control a scene's direction or content by imposing their ideas on others, the performance usually devolves into confusion among the actors or, worse, stalls completely. The second key reason for collaboration is that working with others encourages improv actors to take creative risks because their ideas are supported and developed within a group, rather than individual, performance. Inventing within a community affords improv actors greater freedom to experiment and explore new ideas since the stakes of risk-taking are mitigated by the involvement of other performers. Improv actors actively listen to each other and suggest ideas that build upon what others have suggested to help create a cohesive scene for audiences. Having students perform improv in a writing classroom invites them to experience similar benefits that can extend to their writing. It exposes them to new, collaborative processes of invention that help shape the ideas they write about; it allows them to engage with multiple perspectives by working with others; and it

4

establishes an environment that bolsters creative risk-taking, which can help students take chances with their writing.

Improvising Invention in the Composition Classroom

Using performance to teach and understand writing has been explored by scholars in and outside of Composition Studies; however, too few composition scholars have focused extensively on improvisation or other performance-based approaches as a method of instruction. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I point to a handful of composition scholars that have studied the effects of actually having students perform in their classrooms, either through role-play or dramatic enactments of literary texts. Their work represents an important avenue of research that remains largely unexplored in writing pedagogies. While composition scholars have addressed significant ways in which performance language and theories can help us understand composition and rhetoric, we have yet to fully address what performance practices can offer in terms of representing and interpreting that understanding.

In this dissertation, I seek to contribute to current scholarship by advancing the use of performance as a mode of instruction, in addition to theoretical understandings, in writing pedagogies in two significant ways. First, I provide instructors with practical examples of adapting improv exercises and principles for writing instruction from a class-sized IRB approved research study. The results of this study offer a real-world illustration of how we might use the theories *and* techniques of improv to raise students' awareness of audience and the rhetorical decisions they make in their writing to meet the demands of various audiences. To highlight students' rhetorical decisions in their writing, I refer to my analysis of their texts as well as their responses during interviews. Second, I propose ways in which we might see improv-inspired writing instruction as both a conceptual model of invention as well as a set of heuristics. I argue

that mapping the structures and principles of improvisational acting onto writing classrooms calls attention to methodologies and epistemologies both inside and outside our field, while engaging students in multiple intellectual processes.

This dissertation is also rooted in a tradition of applying non-print methods to help students with writing. James Moffett, an influential voice in Composition, has argued for the importance of drama, both scripted and improvised, in helping students interpret, analyze, and create texts. By enacting scenes and role-playing, he asserted, students embody different perspectives, attitudes, and opinions in ways that inform their thinking. Paulo Freire advocated for "multiple channels of communication" so that students might make better sense of the ideological and social positions they occupy in the world. These channels included visual, verbal, and kinesthetic modes that converged in the dramatizations Freire instructed students to create. More recently, Patricia Dunn argues for the use of visual representations, speech, performance, and other multimodal methods to help students gain "metacognitive distance" on their ideas as they draft and revise writing (1). I build upon this tradition by focusing on the benefits of improvisational acting and other performance-based approaches to writing instruction and to students' experience with writing. Too often, students are asked to develop their abilities as writers primarily through writing. I draw upon research in fields outside of Composition to establish a rationale for using performance as a way of knowing, inventing, and composing that can help students with writing. In the field of secondary English education, for example, drama educators Cecily O'Neill and Dorothy Heathcote have developed an instructional approach known as process drama, which relies on improvisation and role-play, and can help students re-imagine the reading and composing of texts in new contexts. A significant feature of process drama is that students have the opportunity to examine and reflect upon the intellectual and

6

multimodal processes that comprise idea generation and knowledge production in this type of instruction. One benefit of adapting process drama for a writing classroom is that it draws students' attention to processes that influence and shape their writing, with the added benefit of having them communicate their understanding through new modes. For example, students engage with processes of investigating and examining multiple perspectives by role-playing different characters that represent stakeholders in a rhetorical situation. I will explore other benefits of process drama in greater detail in Chapter 3.

To provide accurate explanations of improv techniques and principles as they are practiced today, I draw upon prominent voices in the improv community, including Charna Halpern, Del Close, Kim Johnson, Mick Napier, and Rob Koslowski. This collective group of authors, teachers, directors, and performers has been instrumental in my understanding of the development of improvisational acting and its historical roots in the U.S., which often begin with the work of Viola Spolin. As a drama teacher and supervisor at Chicago's Hull House in the 1930s and 1940s, Spolin devised improv games for children as a way to strengthen their abilities to play and perform as a group. These games provide a method of problem-solving and communicating that has inspired generations of improv actors, directors, artists, and educators. Spolin's foundational work established structures and principles that can teach students of all ages and disciplines valuable lessons in creativity, spontaneity, self-expression, and communication.

Two principles that are essential to improv and that stand to positively affect students' invention practices are acceptance and agreement. Since improv is about creating scenes and conversations without a script, improv performers must accept and agree with each other's ideas to form the dramatic context of a scene. They must learn to build upon existing ideas by offering

up new creative choices to establish characters, relationships, and settings that will entertain audiences. Improv actors often express these two principles with the phrase "Yes, and," which creativity researcher Keith Sawyer describes in the context of a scene: "In every conversational turn, an actor should do two things: metaphorically say *yes,* by accepting the offer proposed in the prior turn, and add something new to the dramatic frame" (192; italics in original). By performing improvisation exercises, students practice accepting and agreeing with ideas generated by other students as well as perspectives different from their own. This philosophy of agreement shares roots in Composition Studies, especially in the work of Peter Elbow, whose believing and doubting games have influenced the ways we approach new ideas, texts, and arguments. [2] Elbow posits that role-playing helps students practice the believing game, which "teaches us to engage or act on an idea—and sometimes we cannot understand something till we've engaged and acted. This is where role playing gets its power: understanding through doing and inhabiting—not debating" ("The Believing Game or Methodological Believing" 11). Put another way, role-playing encourages students to *believe* the validity of an idea or perspective by embodying, or "inhabiting," it. They must actively agree with a viewpoint, even if it differs from their own in order to accurately portray a character or stakeholder in an improvised scenario. By acting as a character with a particular stance, students potentially explore other perspectives, find available arguments, generate lines of reasoning, and discover insights they might not think of otherwise that may influence their writing on the topic. These related processes demonstrate the canon of invention in its most sophisticated form. Students not

---

[2] This idea of understanding Peter Elbow's believing game through the improv principle of acceptance was inspired by Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye in their influential article "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy." More specifically, they argue in a footnote that the improv exercise "Yes, and," which is based on the acceptance principle, can aid students in their invention practices. In this dissertation, I explore in greater depth connections between "Yes, and" and Elbow's believing game, as well as provide specific classroom examples that illustrate ways in which "Yes, and" might be beneficial to students and teachers as an invention strategy for a piece of writing.

only gain an enriched understanding of the topic, but also the weight of the rhetorical context surrounding it. They enact various perspectives relevant to a writing situation, which reinforces the relationship of rhetoric to the views circulating within a particular discourse community. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will discuss how improvisation and role-play broaden students' thinking by offering concrete ways of playing Elbow's believing game and expanding students' notions of invention. I specifically focus on applying performance methods in the context of teaching students how to effectively research and compose persuasive texts.

Using improv to teach writing is also immensely valuable for its emphasis on the role of audience in invention practices. In improvisational theater, audience members typically interact with performers by offering suggestions at the start of a show or scene to inspire material that will be created on stage. While these suggestions remind audiences that the show they are about to watch is entirely improvised, they also stress the highly collaborative position audiences hold in this style of performing. In other words, audiences do more than view the performance. They have a significant impact on its content, which also holds true for writing situations. Effective writers know that the needs and expectations of readers greatly influence their writing and shape their rhetorical choices as they strive to challenge, change, or support readers' thinking. When improv exercises and techniques are brought into writing classrooms, students have the opportunity to acquire a heightened awareness of audience and its role in their decision-making as writers. They come to know what and how they think while developing ways of shaping and presenting that knowledge to multiple audiences. This fundamental element of improv emphasizes the social dimensions of creativity and invention, and by extension, writing.

Another strong reason for using improv to teach writing is that it provides students and teachers with a flexible model for composing that helps challenge rigid rules and strategies

9

students sometimes adopt in prior writing experiences. Mike Rose has long argued that inflexible approaches to writing often hamper students' success and lead to writer's block, preventing students from moving forward with their writing and developing adaptable writing strategies that help them respond to different writing situations. While improv actors adhere to certain structures and guidelines, much of the creative substance they produce arises from highly spontaneous and open processes of invention. Spontaneity grows from performing without the constraints of a script. Unlike scripted acting, improvisation allows actors to invent new characters and scenes on the spot, shaping the course of the action without knowing where or how a scene will end. Improv actors are free to play, explore, and experiment with ideas, even turning real-world expectations on their head. To serve a scene, for example, improv actors may act as though the laws of gravity have disappeared or that humans can now breathe under water. They are creatively unfettered by the imaginative world they create. Within this context, improvisers perform inside very fluid and permeable boundaries that allow for the development of circumstances not previously established. They construct and adapt material as it's invented and support the ideas of others as they are introduced. Fixating on a preconceived idea, thought, or relationship usually deadens an improv scene because it disrupts the collaborative and spontaneous progression of ideas. Therefore, improv presents students and teachers with a mind frame, as well as a method, of stimulating generative and flexible thinking that can also help with writing.

This model of creative freedom and spontaneous exploration is not without its drawbacks. In her book *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City,* theater scholar Amy Seham takes issue with embracing improv as an "ideal mode of group creation" without examining ideological concerns related to power, race, and gender (xi). Drawing on Viola

Spolin, she argues that while improv can promote spontaneity and new ways of thinking, in practice it can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and heteronormative narratives of power. Seham maintains that sometimes actors fall into familiar, stereotypical roles and expectations when inventing material on the spot, thereby reinforcing "societal norms, hierarchies, and conventions" (xxi). In making her argument, she cites the experiences of improv actors she has interviewed as well as her own background as an improv performer and artistic director. One example she highlights is the casting of female performers in the stereotypical roles of girlfriends, wives, mothers, and other positions of lesser power and authority in comparison to their male counterparts. Stereotypical depictions of women and minorities, she argues, "come together, as if by magic, in narratives that appear natural, inevitable, and true, but that are more likely to be drawn from archetype, stereotype, and myth. In addition, in the pressure cooker of performance, players may be driven to reach for the most familiar, most popular references and are often rewarded with the laugher of recognition" (xxi). An idealized view of improv prevents us from seeing its potential to reinscribe ideologies we strive to challenge and redefine in our teaching.

While improv presents freedom from a script, there exists the danger that students, like improvisers, may be less critical of the material they use when faced with open, flexible processes of invention. However, to reject improv-based instruction outright overlooks the benefits it can bring to our classes. Seham acknowledges the value of improv as a method of invention while pointing to some of its limitations in the ways it is practiced. Her perspective motivates us to be more aware of ideological assumptions when we ask students to create characters drawn from audiences different from themselves. In Chapter 3, I will discuss drawbacks associated with using a role-play to help students examine multiple perspectives surrounding a social, political, or environmental issue and write about it with a more

multifaceted understanding. It is possible that students may rely on stereotypical portrayals of the audiences they are asked to represent, which can range from teenagers to adults, including government and business officials. However, this risk emphasizes the importance of reflection and discussion in students' experiences with role-play. These components help advance more nuanced interpretations of audiences and the rhetorical situations of which they are a part. As I continue to use improvisation and role-play in my teaching, I revisit this drawback again and again and look for ways to address it with students.

Throughout this dissertation, I present additional reasons why an improv-based writing pedagogy is beneficial to students and teachers. In making my argument, I use several terms to draw from my own experience as well as guidebooks and manuals for actors to describe both the style of performing I advocate and its performers. I use "improvisation," "improv," "improvisational acting," "improvisational theater," and "improv comedy" to describe this highly spontaneous, unscripted, and unpredictable form of acting. I do this to also point out a distinction between scripted and improvisational acting, although actors of all kinds call upon their abilities to improvise material. For similar reasons, I use "improv performers," "improvisers," and "improv actors" interchangeably. I wish to stress that improv performers write a script as they go along and simultaneously take on the roles of actors, directors, and scriptwriters. At other times, I emphasize Viola Spolin's use of the term "player" to underscore the role of play in improvisation.

Exploring the implications of an improv-based writing pedagogy is the central focus that weaves together all five chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter 1, I address in greater depth a recent trend in composition scholarship that opens a space for further study into performance theories and practices and their relation to rhetoric and composition. I emphasize the significant

12

gap between applying theoretical understandings of performance to teaching writing and actually having students engage with performance-based approaches rooted in role-play and improvisational acting. I argue for greater use of these kinds of approaches, which motivate students to make meaning through multiple modalities, including speaking, listening, and physical movement, in rhetorical contexts. While performance theories can help students gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic connections between writers, audiences, and texts, performance practices offer students new ways of representing and interpreting this understanding. I situate my argument for performance-based strategies within discussions of multiple literacies and using alternate pathways for literacy learning that reflect the work of luminaries in various disciplines in and outside of Composition Studies, including Viola Spolin, Paulo Freire, and Augusto Boal.

Chapter 2 introduces readers to specific principles and exercises within improvisational acting, but more importantly sets up a theoretical basis from which teachers and scholars can understand parallels between processes of invention in improvisation and composition. Drawing on research in Composition Studies, I briefly survey theories of invention and epistemological assumptions guiding the teaching of it to establish a space and rationale for introducing improvisational acting into writing pedagogies. In comparison to ancient theories of rhetoric, contemporary models of invention tend to place less emphasis on social and communal factors influencing how individuals perceive and construe knowledge. Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee claim that as a result, students' experience with invention is often limited to the creation of thesis statements and written outlines without extensive attention to the contexts, audiences, and purposes for writing. I argue that improv, with its theoretical and practical focus on communal ways of knowing, can help restore a link to ancient theories and provide students with

a fuller treatment of invention in writing classrooms. I specifically illustrate how instructors might adapt the improv exercise "Yes, and," which teaches the improv principles of acceptance and agreement, to meet certain objectives in writing instruction. I also expand my introductory discussion of applying these principles to Peter Elbow's believing game as a way of stimulating students' thinking and helping them explore the perspectives of multiple audiences. When students examine the possible views of these audiences by participating in improv exercises, they potentially discover arguments and counterarguments to strengthen a piece of writing.

Chapter 3 addresses another approach grounded in improvisation and performance known as process drama that can enhance the teaching of writing. Developed by Dorothy Heathcote and Cecily O'Neill, this method focuses on using drama in education for the benefit of those involved rather than producing a polished performance for an outside audience. In this chapter, I describe an instance in which I applied aspects of process drama, specifically a role-play scenario, in a classroom setting to help students respond physically and intellectually to a particular writing occasion. I encouraged students to portray various perspectives by acting as different characters, or audiences. I use this example to illustrate ways of integrating process drama into writing pedagogies to not only challenge students to think in new ways by employing different modalities, but also motivate them to view writing process as ongoing, fluid, and communal. Process drama provides teachers and students alike with a unique perspective that helps reinforce a socially constructed and multifaceted view of process, yet remains largely untapped in college writing classes. Process drama, with its emphasis on improvisation as well as reflection, can help students gain important writing process knowledge that contributes to a growing awareness of the different rhetorical strategies, genres, audiences, and purposes with which they engage as writers.

Chapter 4 outlines the details and results of an IRB-approved research study I conducted

to explore the effects of using improv techniques and exercises as invention strategies on

students' writing in my intermediate writing course (WRT 102) at Stony Brook University.[3]

This chapter offers full descriptions of how I designed the study and adapted each improv

exercise I used with students to help them generate and revise text for a persuasive writing

assignment. Students wrote research-based letters that addressed a range of social,

environmental, and political issues facing local communities of which they were a part. I

developed the exercises as a way of assisting them with generating reasons, evidence, arguments,

and counterarguments, and exploring multiple perspectives surrounding their chosen topic,

which they directed towards a real-world audience. Students wrote one draft of their letters

before participating in the improv exercises and one afterwards. In this chapter, I catalogue and

interpret the changes I noticed in students' written drafts and through my analysis of their texts, I

make connections between the objectives of the improv exercises and students' revisions.

Overall, I argue that students' revised writing reflects a heightened awareness of audience in the

new rhetorical choices they made in their second drafts. While this chapter highlights one

particular instance in which students engaged with invention through the methods of

improvisational acting, it suggests ways in which instructors might adapt and take advantage of

these methods to expose students to new composing processes that are collaborative and

audience-focused.

Chapter 5 continues to highlight the results of this research study, but with a focus on

---

[3] I received permission from Stony Brook University's Institutional Research Board (IRB) to conduct this research with students. I informed all students who volunteered as subjects in my study that their written work and oral responses from their interviews might be used in this dissertation. They all signed IRB-approved consent forms. To protect their personal identities and information, I have changed all of their names, replacing them with pseudonyms that I think still reflect the cultural diversity of Stony Brook's student population. I have also changed the names of towns and respective government officials to protect students' personal information.

students' verbal responses gathered through individual interviews. I offer an inside look into students' perceptions of using the exercises as tools for thinking, inventing, and writing. Several of them point to the benefits and drawbacks of having to act spontaneously without pre-planning what they would say during the improvisation. They acknowledge the pressure associated with performing on the spot, which some recognized as a benefit to idea generation, while others described it as a disadvantage, leading them to contribute "random," "off-topic" ideas just to keep the exercises going. Ironically, though, the occurrence of these ideas indicates that the exercises were potentially working to motivate students to invent spontaneously without being constricted by the fear of making a mistake. Additionally, students' reactions suggest that working with improv potentially exposed them to new perspectives and insights into their own writing processes by dramatizing what they do internally through visual, aural, and kinesthetic modes. This chapter ends with recommendations for creating a classroom environment that not only engages students and teachers with improvisation, but provides various occasions to perform improv, some of which are linked to a specific writing assignment and others that are not. Constructing this type of space can help students and teachers practice the principles and structures of improv while fostering an openness to taking creative risks, experimenting, and playing with ideas and perspectives in new ways.

At its core, improvisational acting is about inventing a collective response to a dramatic situation. It is about creating material by tapping into the communal knowledge of a group and working within certain agreed-upon guidelines. What draws me to improv again and again is that when applied to a different, yet related context, it promises to offer students and teachers the benefits of multimodal and collaborative approaches that reinforce the importance of creativity, audience, and community in invention. I continue to use improv exercises and techniques to not

only help students obtain what I hope are helpful heuristics for invention, but also develop a mindset for entering into new ideas and conversations in and through writing. Improv invites students to respond rhetorically to arguments, perspectives, and viewpoints by emphasizing attention to audience, purpose, and message in a communal environment, which is also vital when we expect students to share and respond to each other's writing in constructive, authentic ways. Improv also promotes opportunities for students and teachers to discuss metaphorical and theoretical connections between performance and writing while providing a method of visually demonstrating and embodying those connections. It invites us to connect with ideas, multiple ways of knowing, real and imagined audiences, and long-term and short-term goals for writing. By engaging students in actual improvised performances, we can enhance their abilities to invent, explore, compose, and revise.

Chapter 1: Performance as a Multimodal Approach to the Writing Classroom

College students enter writing courses with varying degrees of experience and ability with writing. Some arrive better equipped to handle the kinds of writing expected of them in college, while a significant portion come less prepared to tackle the writing challenges that lie ahead. Those students that have experienced less success with writing often struggle with meeting the demands of print literacy, especially when their usual ways of thinking are not represented in a composition classroom. Writing pedagogies that rely primarily on print-based approaches fail to support students that exhibit strengths in other areas, such as visual, aural, kinesthetic, and spatial intelligences, nor do they challenge students with strong linguistic abilities to think in new and unfamiliar ways (Dunn 1). Oftentimes, these classrooms de-emphasize other "representational systems (talking, sketching, moving, etc.)" that contribute to knowledge production, but are left unexplored by writing teachers and their students (Dunn 1). When implemented into writing instruction, these non-print modes hold the potential of tapping into epistemologies and approaches that can open students to new intellectual capabilities.

In addition to privileging writing, print-based pedagogies also fail to address the types of multimodal communication characteristic of the 21st century. Students and teachers of writing live in a world where print is no longer the central mode of discovering, defining, and making meaning. In his response to the growing need for multimodal composition, Lee Odell points out that "we can no longer equate *composing* with *writing*" (198), since we compose texts and interact with audiences through a variety of means that require the use of our bodies and voices, images and sounds, as well as alphabetic text. Writers now compose podcasts, videos, digital

narratives, blogs, multimedia presentations, and much more. Students often produce multimodal texts in their extra-curricular writing lives that include digital writing, public demonstrations and speeches, and theatrical and musical performances, all of which rely on some form of visual, aural, and kinesthetic communication (Fishman and Lunsford; DiPirro; Anderson et. al). Proponents of multimodal composition recognize the importance of engaging students in multiple modes of expression and communication in their academic lives as well. Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Tayakoshi advance this argument: "In an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multiple modalities, but also in *composing* in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders" (3). Selfe and Tayakoshi maintain that students need to not only analyze, but actually employ alternate ways of knowing in the creation of multimodal texts. A burgeoning emphasis on multimodal composition supports the use of these alternate pathways and widens the scope of resources available to students and teachers, especially resources that are not print-based.

Yet, an important gap exists when multiple modalities rarely surface in writing classrooms. Students experience the weight of this gap when their primary mode of thinking and literacy practices are disconnected from school-sponsored writing. Within our field, scholars like James Paul Gee and Shirley Brice Heath have studied circumstances surrounding this disconnect, along with a range of literacy practices that inform students' writing and language acquisition in and outside the classroom. In that same tradition, we need to continue to help students practice working in different modes that draw upon their intellectual strengths and lead to newfound insights through multiple ways of producing knowledge. One way of addressing

this gap is to incorporate non-print approaches into writing instruction that promise new methods of making meaning. A particular approach that has been underused in Composition Studies, but can help writing instructors accomplish this goal, is performance.

Traditionally, composition scholars have defined performance in terms of measuring or assessing student writing: students "perform" at a particular level of intelligence and ability related to writing. Expanding this definition, however, to include performance-based techniques used in theater and acting, offers the field innovative ways of theorizing and practicing multimodal composition-based teaching. I am not suggesting that writing teachers abandon all aspects of conventional writing pedagogies. Instead I am arguing that writing teachers consider the importance of integrating multimodal approaches into the teaching of writing, particularly performance methods. Acting techniques familiar to professional and novice actors, like improvisational acting and role-playing, provide unexplored avenues of inquiry and expression that can contribute to students' learning to write. As a verbal and non-verbal modality, performance offers students an opportunity to explore and express ideas through visual, oral, and kinesthetic interactions. Students benefit from working in a dramatic context that requires them to compose using movement as well as speech. As heuristics, performance-based exercises promise new possibilities for teaching invention and add to students' repertoire of composing strategies that rely on other ways of knowing. These strategies help enrich students' abilities to generate, organize, and revise ideas through improvised dialogue and acted out scenes; they also deepen students' understanding of writing situations by expanding their knowledge of writing process, audience, and multiple perspectives, which I intend to address in later chapters.

By integrating aspects of theater and improvisational acting into our writing courses, we not only help broaden the range of composing strategies, but also provide students alternative

means to problem-solve. Writing teachers have made it their goal to help students develop the ability to invent solutions to problems. Most often, first-year writing students are asked to confront problems related to composing, including writer's block and revision, but also to address real-world problems and contemporary issues through research writing. These types of problems usually concern topics related to environmental, social, and political issues, including aspects of pollution or gun violence, for example. Students typically choose a problem to explore in the form of answering a research question. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers,* Erika Lindemann illustrates this perception of writing as problem-solving: "Books, articles, technical reports, laws, and creeds represent solutions to problems, answers to questions human beings must ask because they are aware of their surroundings. Their need to know eventually becomes a need to share their knowledge with others. In one sense, then, all writing solves a problem: How can I communicate my understanding of this subject to my reader?" (6). This goal of problem-solving and "communicat[ing] understanding" largely shapes writing pedagogies, to the point where students are instructed to develop cogent evidence, arguments, and counterarguments that address the purpose and audience of their writing. Yet, in traditionally print-based classrooms, writing is often the primary heuristic for problem-solving: students produce written lists, outlines, freewriting, response papers, drafts, and online posts on discussion boards.

Problem-solving through performance, however, adds new dimensions to writing pedagogies. Students have the opportunity to invent solutions by thinking on their feet and communicating their ideas through visual, verbal, and physical means. While acting as various "characters," or stakeholders, involved in a problem they are exploring, students collectively try out solutions and witness the effects on others in a dramatic setting. For instance, students may

gain new insights into environmental clean-up by taking on the roles of invested business leaders or environmental activists.[4] Acting in role may help bring to the forefront of their consciousness the values and perspectives of these groups, including the groups' motivations and expectations. Moreover, rather than work alone brainstorming, students collaborate to solve a problem. They work together to: (1) invent lines of reasoning and critique various arguments; (2) gain valuable insight into their own and others' perspectives by embodying different "characters" or audiences, which may also help students develop empathy for the situations of others; and (3) discover new ways of conceptualizing and thinking through ideas by using non-print approaches. As a result, students contribute to a collective knowledge base informed by their experiences in and outside of the role-play, and potentially rethink their viewpoints by exploring and investigating multiple perspectives while acting in role and by listening to their peers. As an alternative format for thinking and constructing knowledge, performance advances the field's commitment to problem-solving in addition to multimodal composition (Selfe; Shipka; Yancey), and the importance of multiple literacies (Kress; New London Group; Lankshear and Knobel).

I. A "Turn to Performance"

Within the last decade, scholars in Composition Studies have paid closer attention to the role of performance in composition and rhetoric; however, less attention has been given to actually engaging students in performance techniques and acting as a multimodal method of instruction. Leading the way though in current scholarship, Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford have been instrumental in forging a connection between performance and literacy, highlighting the visual and physical dimensions of composing that performance elicits. In their oft-cited 2005 article, "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy," they argue that performance represents "a

---

[4] See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of improvised role-play as an approach to problem-solving and research writing.

dynamic form of literate expression" (226) that not only reinforces ancient ties to rhetoric and orality, but exemplifies multimodal communication in the 21st century, teaching students "to work with different systems of signification in multiple modalities" (246). Performance enjoins students to make meaning through talk, physical activity, and visualization, which informs how and what students are able to compose. Whether students are performing slam poetry live, delivering a speech in-person, or creating video or audio broadcasts, they are "embodying writing through voice, gesture, and movement" (Fishman and Lunsford 226, 246). While Fishman and Lunsford end their article with a call for further research, their focus remains largely on instances in which students perform writing as a product or text. They argue that students engage with performance practices when they transform their writing into digital texts, video, or live performances. What they do not address as extensively is how performance practices might be integrated into composing processes to help students produce a variety of texts, including print. Expanding applications of performance practices and theories to written as well as digital and oral texts opens a space for employing alternate systems of constructing and communicating meaning that can also address concerns central to writing pedagogies, including knowledge of rhetoric and writing process.

Barring a few exceptions, less attention has been given recently to actually engaging students in performance techniques as part of writing process, specifically as invention strategies. Composition scholars in the January 2012 debut issue of *College Composition and Communication Online,* titled "The Turn to Performance," have contributed to a growing interest in performance. Special guest editor, Jenn Fishman, acknowledges that a recent "turn" to performance provides an opportunity "to refine our understanding of how performance operates within our field(s)" ("Editor's Introduction"), and it has, but not as much as it could. Given the

content of the journal issue, this "turn" Fishman describes reflects greater attention to the types of texts students write and perform in online and face-to-face contexts, including videos of musical performances and improvisational theater (Anderson; DiPirro). While these approaches shed light on valuable intersections between performance, composition, and rhetoric, composition scholars and writing teachers have to this point for the most part limited their views of performance to three perspectives: (1) performance as a product; (2) performance as a metaphor to describe students' composing practices; or (3) performance as a theoretical lens to investigate student-teacher relationships, specifically the traditional role of teacher as the "sage on stage." By exploring the gap between theoretical and product-driven understandings of performance and using performance methods as part of writing process, we can open a space for studying new forms of communication and heuristics for teaching writing.

II. Performance as Metaphor in Composition Studies

In recent years, composition scholars have applied metaphorical discussions of performance to highlight aspects of students' composing processes, contexts for writing, and factors within writing situations. More specifically, they have adopted performance vocabulary to underline the different roles writers play in various discourse communities as they try on different perspectives and develop a credible ethos. In her 2007 article, "Composing Through the Performative Screen: Translating Performance Studies into Writing Pedagogy," Meredith Love explains her use of performance concepts and terms like "actor-writers," "backstage," and "character" to help students negotiate and perform various personae in their writing by paying attention to audience, genre, and purpose (19-20). She argues that performance language can assist students in realizing the different "writerly characters" or identities they adopt in different rhetorical situations (13). The students Love describes in her article complete assignments by

24

writing as "multiple characters" (20), instead of *acting* as them through dialogue and movement, which offers students different types of insights that I explore in later chapters of this dissertation. Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford also use the language of performance to describe how research studies "illuminate otherwise hidden or undocumented *scenes, actors,* and *acts* of composition" (225; emphasis added). These examples help locate instances in which metaphorical understandings of performance intersect with writing pedagogies, while highlighting a need to explore additional applications of performance.

Amy Devitt, Mary Jo Reiff, and Anis Bawarshi take a similar metaphorical approach in their student handbook *Scenes of Writing,* in which they ask students to imagine themselves as actors and rhetorical situations as staged scenes: "As in the scenes of a movie or a play—where actors take their cues from co-actors and directors, the stage and surrounding sets, and the time and place of the action—you take your cures for how to act from the scenes you act within" (3). Based on this understanding, Devitt et al. prompt students to consider the various roles and identities they assume when they write in different social and cultural "scenes," or contexts, along with the strategies and approaches that govern communication in those roles. For example, students may take on different roles in their writing, including that of a friend, co-worker, or concerned citizen, depending on their purpose and audience. As a result, students and teachers of writing engage more deeply with performance as a metaphorical concept, which can provide new discoveries into the relationships between writers, audiences, and texts; however, this focus on performing different roles *in writing* eclipses the potential of having students actually perform in kinesthetic, spatial, and verbal ways to explore some of the same rhetorical terms and concepts.

III. Performance as a Theoretical Lens

Scholars in and outside of Composition Studies have studied performance as a theoretical framework to describe structures within education, including student-teacher relationships and the larger institutional forms that shape them. Specifically sociologists and anthropologists working outside the teaching of writing, including Peter McLaren and Victor Turner, have helped expose the phenomenon that teachers are often cast in the role of performer, leading the action and outcomes of the classroom, while students remain silent, inactive observers. In his oft-cited book *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures* (1993)*,* McLaren argues that the environment of schooling is built and rebuilt upon these types of student and teacher performances that occur repeatedly through the form of rituals and traditions. These performances, McLaren asserts, "symbolically transmit societal and cultural ideologies" (3), and re-inscribe hierarchical relationships between teachers and students based on power, institutional expectations, and a network of behaviors and actions. In "Teaching Is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor" (1994), performance scholar Elyse Lamm Pineau continues this argument by acknowledging the role of performance theories in describing "a paradigm of educational experience" that investigates the scripts, roles, and subjectivities within educational contexts (18).

The role of teacher as performer underscores significant epistemological assumptions that have been taken up in composition scholarship to challenge the teacher's position as the sole producer and conveyor of knowledge. Writing in 1998, Kathryn Flannery describes in theoretical terms how performance represents a "disruptive pedagogy" by removing the teacher from the proverbial position on "stage" and students from the role of "watchers," compelling them to actively participate and reflect on the performativity of teaching and learning (44-47).

26

Performance theories help position students as shapers rather than mere receivers of knowledge, thereby calling attention to these epistemological beliefs. These theories also enhance Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education, which I explore later in this chapter. On a textual level, Thomas Newkirk examines student-teacher relationships by studying how students perform a version of themselves in their personal writing that reflects how they see themselves within the structures of the classroom and outside it. In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing,* he describes students' personal writing as "cultural performance" and argues that these seemingly "natural," personal pieces of writing actually reflect students' constructions and presentations of self for an audience, particularly the teacher in the classroom. Students engage in acts of "self-presentation" that constitute forms of performance (Newkirk, 3). Theoretical understandings of performance in education shed light on the social roles students play and the extent to which they embody these roles in their writing and in their actions within the classroom.

IV. Performance as Heuristic in the Composition Classroom

Using performance practices, such as acting techniques, to supplement the teaching of writing is not entirely new in Composition Studies. A handful of scholars have made similar arguments about implementing performance-based exercises and approaches to enhance writing instruction. However, their work represents a lost thread in composition scholarship that needs to be taken up again to fully explore what performance practices can offer the field. If we imagine the role of performance in composing processes, and not just in terms of product-driven, metaphorical, or theoretical applications, we can provide students with multimodal ways of producing and understanding various texts, while challenging them to think in new ways.

Previous scholarship in this area focuses on students composing dramatic scenes, responding to dramatic texts, and role-playing in the composition classroom. In an earlier example in composition scholarship, Stuart Lenig describes student performances of key scenes and characters from dramatic literature in his 1992 article "Using Drama to Teach Composition." He asserts that drama "personalizes" students' experiences with texts and the language therein by directly involving them in live performances (305). These in-class performances, he maintains, serve to deepen students' personal connection to and analysis of plot, character, and setting, as well as the social, moral, and political issues raised in a play. The main thrust of his argument is that performance supports "new ways of seeing and discussing *literature*" and "produces more fully realized opinions about *literature*," to the point of bolstering reader response theory (Lenig, 305 emphasis added). Although Lenig's approach rests primarily on practices of reading instead of writing, his work does open up possibilities for using performance as part of the writing process, specifically the invention and exploration of ideas through non-print means. Amy Reichert underscores this potential years later when she writes that Lenig's approach "capitalizes on interpersonal, bodily-kinesthetic, and visual-spatial intelligences in using drama to help students process concepts" (170). As an active mode of interpretation and meaning-making, performance is not limited to the exploration of dramatic literature. It can also enhance students' abilities to write by offering new modes of discovery that can be applied to a range of topics and issues students choose to write about in a composition course. These techniques provide students with opportunities to interact with each other as different "characters," or audiences, that represent different discourse communities to which they are writing.[5]

---

[5] See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of the implications of using role-play to assist students with non-dramatic texts and with argumentative writing.

Moving in this direction, Susan Wheeler encourages new and veteran writing teachers to consider using dramatic scenes to teach argument in Thomas Newkirk's 1993 collection *Nuts and Bolts: A Practical Guide to Teaching College Composition*. In this text, Wheeler describes a series of writing exercises designed to promote discovery, invention, and experimentation, some of which stem from her experience in an acting group. She acknowledges that the sequence of these exercises reflects the method acting techniques of Russian director and actor Constantin Stanislavsky (81). For example, students work to re-create an important argument from their lives in the form of a dramatic scene by establishing setting, dialogue, stage directions, characters, action, and conflict. What makes this exercise different from writing a conventional script is that students insert detailed reflections of their personal feelings and reactions brought on by specific dialogue or the reactions of other characters in the scene. Students focus primarily on these reflections and revisit the personal argument in nuanced ways. Yet, taking Wheeler's method one step further holds additional potential for writing teachers. By performing these scenes, students can further investigate both familiar and unfamiliar perspectives—a skill highly valued in teaching composition—and assume the roles of invested stakeholders. They can work collaboratively to detail the reasons behind an argument and then devise possible outcomes that they then enact in a dramatic scene. In this way, students engage with multiple perspectives and are not limited to just their personal reaction to an argument.

Years later, aspects of Lenig and Wheeler's work have resurfaced in composition-based teaching, although in newer contexts. In a 2002 article, "From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writer," Adar Cohen makes theoretical and practical connections between improvisation, a form of unscripted acting that relies on dialogue, collaboration, and role-play, and composition theories. Specifically, he outlines the benefits of

using improvisational acting in peer tutoring sessions, a phenomenon he calls "improv-tutoring" (6). By playing improv exercises, he argues, peer tutors involve tutees in creative, spontaneous thinking, and encourage tutees to develop lists of possible topics for a paragraph or an entire paper, as well as develop the ability to choose and develop effective ideas. The tutors help fledgling writers generate ideas, ward off writing anxieties, and increase the level of confidence in their writing. Cohen maintains that the underlying principles of improvisation, including self-expression, openness, creativity, spontaneity, and discovery, can support an environment that affirms student's ideas and assuages doubt.[6]

More recently, role-playing has become an integral part of teaching composition and has provided writing teachers and students with unique opportunities to examine perspective, audience, and language across disciplines. In a noteworthy example, Irene Clark and Ronald Fischbach discuss the effects of using role-play to help Health Sciences students develop a "writer identity" as a Public Health professional. In their 2008 article, "Writing and Learning in the Health Sciences: Rhetoric, Identity, Genre, and Performance," they argue that developing this identity is key to students' understanding of the rhetorical situations built into their chosen field. As part of a linked curriculum, students enrolled in a Health Sciences-focused writing course that emphasized understanding the persona and writing tasks of a Public Health professional. During an in-class role-play, students took on the persona of either a Public Health professional seeking approval of a grant proposal, or a committee member with the task of deciding whether to approve or reject the student's proposal. This proposal focused on their research and knowledge of a public health issue, in this case binge drinking among college students, for a real audience both in and outside of the classroom. By taking on the role of various "characters," or

---

[6] See Chapter 2 for further discussion of the relationship between improvisational acting and invention in composition, and the implications of using improv as an invention strategy.

stakeholders, students needed to consider multiple sides to the writing situation and address the different arguments and counterarguments supporting certain viewpoints. Their efforts highlight the extent to which students perform various disciplinary identities and how integral this understanding is to their success as writers.

After this classroom activity, Clark and Fischbach note that "students expressed new insights into both the cognitive and somatic meaning of being a public health educator. Some students stated that for the first time that they believed they had a concrete professional goal to which they could direct their educational efforts" (25). Clark and Fischbach's research suggests that role-play enhances students' understanding of audience, purpose, and their position as a writer. It deepens their ability to effectively develop a writing persona that exists within a specific discourse community and meet the demands of a rhetorical situation. By using performance methods, we can help students expand their thinking and synthesize older information with new ideas. Clark and Fischbach end their article by stating that "role-playing, performance and identity are crucial, but as yet under-realized elements in implementing a successful Writing Across the Curriculum linkage" (25).

The same can be said of other occasions for teaching writing, including first-year writing courses. Pedagogies supporting these courses typically underuse performance and role-play to help students develop a "writer identity" and explore different arguments and counterarguments surrounding an issue. These components are equally important to first-year students as they are to students in Clark and Fischbach's course. First-year writing programs strive to help students develop argumentative writing abilities as well as an identity as writers within specific disciplines. Therefore using role-play as a meaningful opportunity to explore audience, purpose, and argument can help students understand what it means to act as a writer in an academic field,

career, and rhetorical situation. Integrating role-play into first-year writing courses also gives students a chance to assume the role of various "characters" or stakeholders in writing situations characteristic of these courses. Therefore, to realize the effects of Clark and Fischbach's research in wider contexts, writing teachers ought to consider introducing performance techniques into writing pedagogies in more extensive ways, beginning in first-year writing courses.

In a more recent example, composition scholar and teacher Mary Salibrici suggests ways of doing this with students by helping them examine arguments and perspectives different from their own. In the 2009 collection *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, Salibrici outlines assignments that present "students with an opportunity to invent perspectives with words and thus deepen their understanding of the basic rhetorical premise of the course—that is, what you write is governed by who you are, why you are writing, to whom, and at what cost" (172). Given this rhetorical lens, Salibrici asks her students to "adopt a particular persona," as either a *New York Times* reporter, a student in a college history course, or a magazine writer, and then summarize the historical case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in writing (173). Students not only identify how each persona is constructed through diction, tone, grammatical choices, and other features, but also consider the effects of this construction in achieving a specific purpose. Later on, students perform a mock trial by assuming the role of a specific person involved in the case. This act of performance, she argues, contributes not only to their understanding of the trial, but to their analysis and understanding of the rhetorical choices used by various authors writing about the same situation. Students gain access to multiple perspectives while exploring how those perspectives are conveyed and constructed through language. As an extension of Salibrici's work, first-year writing students can also perform scenes from a mock trial or other

public forum that highlight situations relevant to their lives. For example, in addition to exploring historical trials, students may investigate real-world issues in their local schools and hometowns, and thereby broaden their thinking about a particular event or issue, its presentation in the news and media, and possible ways of resolving it through performance.

V. Performance as Multimodal Composition

Performance offers students an opportunity to compose in multiple modalities as they explore and express ideas through verbal, visual, oral, and kinesthetic means. When cast in the language of multimodal scholarship, performance entails specific "affordances" or capabilities that differ from other modalities, especially alphabetic text. In Cynthia Selfe's edited collection *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, author Daniel Keller defines affordances as the "capabilities of representing meaning in particular ways and in certain contexts" (60). He explains that the affordances of certain mediums, like video and music, offer different ways of communicating a message, and that part of the work of multimodal teaching is helping students understand these differences. Students not only need to be aware of the different affordances inherent in each medium, but also what these affordances allow them to do to achieve specific purposes: "Teachers can help students explore the affordances of media and modalities by comparing how different modalities do the work of creating meaning and talking about the possibilities of representing meaning in different ways" (Keller 61). For example, he asserts that in comparison to print, video "is extremely efficient and effective in representing movement and the passage of time," whereas "music can convey emotion and tone with great efficiency and effectiveness" (61). Unlike alphabetic text, the affordances of video and music allow the composer to tap into different systems or semiotic resources. These systems are not limited to visual and auditory affordances alone, but also connect with the body as a source of meaning.

33

Literacy scholar Gunther Kress stresses the importance of recognizing these resources: "Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they *afford* different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world, and through this differential engagement with the world they facilitate differential possibilities of development: bodily, cognitively, affectively" (157 emphasis added). When performing in dramatic scenes or other acting exercises, students engage with the world and the experiences of others through visual, verbal, aural, and kinesthetic affordances. More specifically, dialogue, gesture, and movement form the basis of semiotic systems students use to signal meaning. Students use their voices, facial expressions, body movements, and an understanding of physical space to effectively communicate with other people while using alternate semiotic modes. Additionally, they make rhetorical choices as they act out characters' physical and emotional traits, and express certain viewpoints through the tone of their voice and the physical positioning of their bodies. Through performance, students try on and embody new ideas in ways other than print.

While Clark and Fischbach do not focus specifically on their students' use of multiple modalities and affordances, their students likely used non-verbal ways of communicating to embody the persona of a Public Health professional. By assuming the part of a particular "character," or identity, in a role-play, students gain insight into the kinds of writing Public Health professionals compose, but also the physical and visual choices these professionals make to convey their messages and influence audiences. Students make decisions about the language they will use to communicate, but also how they will communicate their message visually and kinesthetically to others. For example, students tap into the affordances of physical communication when choosing to make eye contact, or deciding whether or not to cross their arms, or whether to sit or stand during a conversation. These physical choices may appear trivial

to someone not versed in alternative semiotic modes like acting; however, they signal significant understandings about status, power, and authority that influence how a message is received. Students learn that as grant committee members in Clark and Fischbach's role-play, they possess greater levels of power, while students playing the role of Public Health professionals are in position of less power as they propose their grant. This understanding of authority and ethos contributes to students' rhetorical understanding of the professional situation, and potentially their writing choices as well. The choices they make as writers also convey authority and influence ethos-building. Students can compare their audience's reaction in the role-play to possible outcomes that may result from readers experiencing their writing.

This brief example underscores two important reasons for incorporating performance methods in the work we do with students: (1) this type of approach, such as role-play, helps students gain rhetorical knowledge and produce serious academic work; and (2) the modalities inherent in performing tap into multiple intelligences often overlooked in writing pedagogies. All students would potentially benefit from an opportunity to generate knowledge using non-print modes, including students whose strengths lie in kinesthetic and visual intelligences, as well as students whose primary mode of thinking is print. Role-play entails affordances that encourage students to problem-solve and communicate in inventive ways, and makes varying perspectives heard, seen, and known.

VI. Performance and Literacy

Performance demands alternative literacy practices and offers avenues of meaning-making that challenge long-standing attitudes about epistemology. A writing pedagogy that incorporates performance at various stages of composing communicates to students that other ways of knowing are also valuable and accepted as rigorous and complex. It sends them a more

35

inclusive message that non-print methods of generating, interpreting, and conveying meaning can support and enhance the "serious" work of academic writing. When engaging in dialogue and role-play with others, students accomplish complex tasks that support literacy growth: they invent material they want to write about, generate potential arguments and counterarguments, and explore different perspectives while acting as stakeholders in a rhetorical situation. This allows students to not only act and think from the perspective of another person, but also to see how their own thinking changes and evolves in concrete ways. This collective exercise can bring to light some of the more abstract and unconscious processes that go on in composing. Together, students make discoveries that take them in directions they might not otherwise go given conventional strategies.

By giving students the opportunity to engage with performance methods, we provide them with a variety of approaches to imagine different forms of inventing, planning, and organizing their writing. We also enhance their ability to adapt their composing processes for multiple audiences in multiple contexts. Yet, these types of approaches have been taken up less frequently in Composition Studies in the past. In *Talking Sketching, Moving,* Patricia Dunn offers a convincing explanation by pointing to deep-rooted epistemological assumptions shaping the field. She argues that Composition scholars and teachers struggle to understand that an "over-emphasis on writing," which rests at the core of the field's existence, could in fact harm student's development as writers (15): "Generally speaking, Composition believes that writing is not simply *one* way of knowing; it is *the* way. In Composition theory courses, readings attest mostly writing's benefits. That commonplace may be what makes it so difficult for us in Composition to see word-based epistemologies in any way other than liberatory and promoting social justice" (15). By envisioning writing as always "liberatory and promoting social justice,"

36

scholars and teachers neglect to see that focusing on print literacy over others at times contributes to students' difficulties with writing. Writing may not be empowering for all students and by including other ways of knowing, such as performance, into our teaching, we enhance what students can demonstrate as knowledge and how they present themselves as thinkers. Dunn maintains that by privileging writing in our classrooms we not only exclude other intelligences, but worse, convince students that "alternate ways of knowing" are not valued, important, or meaningful (18).

Performance helps challenge the predominance of print-based writing instruction by opening new pathways into multiple modes of expression and communication. Its presence in a composition classroom helps contribute to a changing image of literacy and transforms traditional notions about what it means to be literate and how literacy is taught. Much of what counts as composition instruction today tends to conform to standards of print literacy. Typically, students are instructed to use conventional written strategies like written outlines, lists, reflective letters and cover memos, freewriting and written responses to peers about their writing. They rely on verbal-linguistic intelligences instead of employing visual, auditory, or kinesthetic approaches that also engender collaboration and collective investigation of writing topics. These conventional classroom circumstances perpetuate belief in a romanticized view of writing. Students develop the impression that writers sit alone at a desk, pouring over their ideas until struck by a flash of creativity. This image of an individual writer with a "natural" ability to write is greatly limiting, and prevents students from imagining literacy as collaborative, social, and multimodal. Performance techniques, on the other hand, break down these preconceived notions and illustrate the social, collaborative, and recursive facets of writing. Exercises driven by improvised thinking, physical movement, and a focus on audience reinforce the multi-

perspectival and multidirectional work of composing. They also do the work of showing

students that others grapple with inventing and organizing material for writing, and that many of

their struggles are commonly shared. For students and teachers of writing, instances of

performance re-imagine literacy and composing processes as multimodal, and draw upon verbal,

visual, aural, and spatial ways of thinking.

VII. Historical Roots of Performance

Using performance to teach literacy is not unique to multimodal scholarship in

Composition Studies. Its use bears historical roots in the work of Brazilian literacy educator

Paulo Freire, his contemporary, director and activist Augusto Boal, and the teachings of Viola

Spolin and Dorothy Heathcote, both of whom revolutionized theater education in schools. In

various geographical locations and at different points in time, these individuals introduced and

employed unconventional approaches to teaching literacy. They utilized visual, oral, spatial, and

kinesthetic ways of knowing to help illiterate groups learn valuable lessons about language, and

gain the ability to change social and political forces informing their position in the world. They

also promoted an awareness of and advocacy for performance as an entryway into learning to

communicate, express ideas and perspectives, and question dominant ways of thinking.

More specifically, these educators acknowledged and capitalized on the potential of

performance and theater to tap into multiple ways of perceiving and knowing the world,

especially since they often worked with illiterate populations for whom word-based literacies

posed significant challenges to communication. Therefore they had to find other ways to reach

these individuals and bring them into the verbal-linguistic practices that characterized literacy of

the dominant culture. In varying ways, Freire, Boal, Spolin, and Heathcote recognized the

potential of performance to help their students unlock meaning, make sense of experience, and

explore solutions to problems related to their personal lives. Performance held the key to developing literacy practices that allowed students to produce knowledge and bridge what they experienced outside the classroom with what they learned inside it.

In their writing about the power of theater, these educators have argued for theater as a way for people to: understand and shape experience; actively engage with and create viable solutions to ongoing problems; and imagine the social conditions for a different reality. The methods of theater are central to tapping into other ways of knowing in the writing classroom. We have the opportunity to use performance to help students become confident and competent writers, and effective communicators in private and public discourse. The work of the writing classroom stretches beyond the walls of the classroom and branches out into public spheres. The performance work evident in these educators' teachings demonstrate that performance serves as both a representation of knowledge and a way of knowing; both the content and form of meaning.

VIII. Paulo Freire's "Multiple Channels of Communication"

Since the late 1960s, Composition scholars have taken up Paulo Freire's liberatory teachings, and actively applied his revolutionary approach to literacy development in composition theories and pedagogies. Over the years, his influence has been felt most strongly in discussions about the role of critical pedagogy and Freire's praxis in the composition classroom. Freire strove to develop students' critical consciousness of their position in the world, and the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural forces informing that position. In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World,* Freire, along with Donaldo Macedo, maintain that "reading the word implies continually reading the world" (35), which suggests that students must discern the meaning of their personal experiences and the language used to convey them in order to

challenge oppressive structures of power and privilege. By raising students' critical awareness, Freire and Macedo aimed to transform students into active agents with the power to change their world.

While Freire's work has largely shaped scholarly conversations about activism, social justice, and critical investigations of race, gender, and class, his unconventional, non-print approaches to teaching literacy are often overlooked. In *Talking, Sketching, Moving,* Patricia Dunn argues that Composition scholars have willingly adopted Freire's guiding praxis of critical pedagogy and critical reflection without necessarily considering his non-print methods. Working with illiterate students in Brazil and Chile, Freire needed to find alternative ways to reach them through visual illustrations and oral discussions, and help develop their understanding of the social and political realities in their lives. To do this, Freire employed what he termed "multiple channels of communication," which offered students multiple ways of representing and understanding their world through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic means (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 49). Students were asked to sketch or stage a physical response, for example, to "existential situations" that reflected social problems plaguing their lives, like poverty and oppression (42-45).

Yet, this aspect of Freire's work remains under-represented. Dunn offers a plausible explanation for this absence: "Even as we promote the dialectical problematizing of other socially constructed assumptions, we seem unaware of our own overuse of one channel of communication—writing—as a way of knowing" (38). The privileging of writing in Composition Studies has led scholars to pursue Freire's theories and teachings "to support a limited view of language, and to discourage alternative symbol systems," which are "multisensory" and "multi-dimensional" (Dunn 38, 39). By emphasizing these aspects of his

work, Composition Studies can better recognize systems that, like performance, rely on movement, body position, talk, physical interaction in addition to verbally-based epistemologies.

Current scholarship in Composition Studies, however, affirms Patricia Dunn's assessment of Freire's work in the field in her 2001 book. Present-day scholars often align the aims of writing pedagogies and theories with Freire's goals of critical pedagogy and critical consciousness in the classroom. Recent publications attest to this continued focus, rather than exploring the multiple pathways Freire developed to help students become literate. For instance, Jessica Enoch's 2004 article in *CCC's* draws upon Freire's praxis of critical reflection to establish a connection between Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories and critical pedagogy. In that same year in *College English,* Jennifer Beech's applies Freire's critical pedagogy to her discussion of race and class in "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness." Other publications that emphasize similar aspects of Freire's theories include Barbara Duffelmeyer's (2002) "Critical Work in First-Year Composition: Computers, Pedagogy, and Research," David Kirkland's (2004) "Rewriting School: Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom," and Caleb Corkery's (2009) "Rhetoric of Race: Critical Pedagogy without Resistance." These authors engage with features of critical pedagogy as they examine the effects of technology, students' language practices, and racial identities respectively on teaching writing. Kirkland does consider the importance of non-print texts, like video and music, to represent students' lived experiences. However, his emphasis rests more on the extent to which these texts resonate with students' cultural practices than their use as distinct forms of knowing. More needs to be done in Composition Studies to renew attention to Freire's "multiple channels of communication."

For Freire, the use of dramatizations, or "sociodramas," unlocks people's understanding of the world and their position in it in ways other than print. It allows people to act out their social and political positions according to imagined and real circumstances, eliciting genuine emotions and reactions from others. Incorporating this aspect of Freire's approach in the composition classroom today can reconnect writing pedagogies with an underrepresented, and perhaps forgotten, aspect of Freire's teaching. Today's students, like Freire, have an opportunity to interact in ways that represent how they currently live their lives, how others think they should, and how they hope to live in the future. Participating in a dramatic encounter promotes multiple ways of making meaning while raising students' critical awareness of their socially constructed perspectives.

Applying Freire's "multiple channels of communications" to teaching writing challenges the primacy of print-based modes as the basis for literacy education, and questions long-standing assumptions about writing as the only sanctioned way of knowing. *Education for Critical Consciousness* represents Freire's commitment to positioning learners as the focal point of education and their critical awareness of the world as a central goal. Therefore the most effective channel, or "code," of representation reflects what is most effective and suitable for students, not their teachers: "A codification may be simple or compound. The former utilizes either the visual (pictorial or graphic), the tactile, or the auditive channel; the latter utilizes various channels. The selection of the pictorial or graphic channel depends not only on the material to be codified, but also on whether or not the individuals with whom one wishes to communicate are literate" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 114-115). This line of thinking promotes the use of non-print methods, including oral discussion and enactment, as a basis of understanding. Using multiple "codes," or channels, in composition-based teaching then would

42

help writing teachers potentially reach greater numbers of students and offer them more student-centered ways of representing their lived experiences. Since Freire's approach requires that teachers take into account what is more appropriate for students, students' needs and abilities inform methods of teaching instead of a privileging of any one mode of learning and knowing.

In the 1998 issue of *Convergence* commemorating Freire, Deborah Barndt summarizes several of his organizing principles and practices that guide literacy development. She provides examples of his use of codes, which take the form of "photographs, slides, posters, reading texts, newspapers, recorded interviews, dramatizations, etc." and are "culturally appropriate to the learners" (63). According to Barndt, these codes "become the tools for representing students' social reality to them for critical decoding, for reflection leading toward action" (64). These channels or codes are what allows students to analyze, interpret, and reflect upon the circumstances governing their lives that become a "generative theme" or overarching issue to explore in a role-play. For instance, students may explore the theme of poverty or unemployment, and convey their reaction to these topics by embodying a figure, or character, tied to that issue, including an employer or government official. This process opens students to various channels that influence their ability to create and discern meaning within the world of the classroom and beyond it.

Role-playing and dramatic enactments offer tangible ways for students to try on and engage with multiple perspectives that either reflect or deviate from their own. In her work with women at a Mothers' Club in Peru in 1976, Barndt observed how Freire's dramatizations could uncover social, economic, and political forces governing women's lives. Through enactments, which Barndt filmed and later presented to community members, these women explored power relationships that grew out of their daily interactions with church officials and the government.

According to Barndt, the women's "sociodramas" provided unique, material experiences through which the women could explore abstract understandings of specific social issues, including domestic violence: "As codes, the dramas were more successful than the photo-novels in drawing upon students' daily experiences and codifying their perceptions of power and authority. Dramas have a way of tapping immediately peoples' memories, experiences, and feelings associated with situations, emphasizing the concrete rather than the abstract" (67). At the same time, these dramas promote the "participatory production of codes" (68), drawing upon the individual as well as collective experiences of the people involved. These dramas are collaborative, social, and rely on an understanding of communal needs and experiences.

Freire's use of dramatization and performance as a "code" broadens the range of tools available to students as they compose and create meaning. Writing teachers that include such an approach in their classrooms expose students to multiple ways of learning and understanding, and resist setting up a hierarchy of print against other means. Moreover, the participatory and student-centered nature of Freire's channels contrasts with conventional pedagogies that reinforce a "banking" model of education. This model, which Freire strongly critiqued, positions "a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)" (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 57). Performance practices like dramatizations and role-playing offer writing teachers ways of challenging this model of education. Under these circumstances, students and teachers participate as co-creators of knowledge and students are no longer "'containers' or 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher" (Freire 58). Students are not cut off from inventing knowledge, but do it alongside their teacher. Therefore, performance not only affirms the importance of multiple modes of communication, including visual, oral, or kinesthetic modes, but also helps reverse long-standing epistemological assumptions.

IX. Augusto Boal and "Forum Theater"

At the same time Freire began formulating theories of multi-sensory teaching in the 1960s, Brazilian director and social activist Augusto Boal imagined new ways of using the theater as a vehicle for resisting oppression and enacting social change. While working with illiterate and politically disenfranchised groups in Latin America and throughout the world, Boal sought to create an interactive space for people to experiment and invent solutions to larger social and political problems. A major goal of his approach was for participants to transfer the knowledge and interactions from the theater to the outside world. People would devise possible solutions to real-world problems that they then embodied in their lives once they left the theater. Influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Boal designed a "theatre of the oppressed" to reach this goal and extend Freirian conceptions of pedagogy, literacy, and the democratization of education into theories of performance. In an effort to transform conventional perceptions of the theater, which he argued maintained oppressive hierarchies, he sought to remove audiences from their passive role in relation to actors. Boal attempted to give audience members the opportunity to question, critique, and rethink answers to social problems by participating in the action onstage. Therefore, instead of focusing on the creation of a final product for a paying audience, he envisioned theater serving purposes of education and literacy that would revolutionize society.

Implementing aspects of Boal's "theatre of the oppressed" into the composition classroom offers writing pedagogies new insights into ongoing processes of discovery and inquiry that shape writing and writing instruction. Boal's techniques directly involve students in performance by bringing them into the dramatic action of a scene or play. Through performing, students have the opportunity to explore topics for writing, especially topics relevant to their

45

lives outside the classroom, and also express concern over problems related to composing, including language use, voice, and audience. As a result, students do more than just try on ideas. They investigate multiple perspectives and adopt them as their own so as to empower change within participants and themselves. Like Boal's students, they act out relationships that define their interactions within various discourse communities and that reflect issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Students have the chance to examine oppressive forces that inform the choices they make as writers and communicators in these communities.

One aspect of "theatre of the oppressed" that illustrates this capability is Boal's "forum theater." This type of participatory theater functions like a public forum, while providing a collaborative space for people to openly explore and contest social and political injustices. Unlike traditional theatrical performances, "forum theater" allows audience members to temporarily pause the dramatic action of a play and exchange places with an actor, thereby taking on the role of a protagonist or another character. "Forum theater" intentionally blurs the lines between actors and spectators, creating what Boal termed "spect-actors." In his foundational text, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Boal explains his method: "the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!" (155). This defining characteristic of "forum theater" engenders active involvement from the audience and supports the development of individual agency and authorization. Audience members are authorized to collaboratively offer and work through solutions to conflicts that exist not only in the lives of characters on stage, but in their own as well, including issues of poverty, unemployment, and family relationships, which Freire's students explored in their dramatizations.

Writing teachers have made issues of agency and self-authorship the aim of instruction

and curriculum, especially given their attention to Freire's theories, specifically his process of

conscientization. According to Freire, this process entails raising students' critical consciousness

and understanding of the contexts in which they live, and the significant role of reading and

writing in developing a sense of agency. Freire writes that "acquiring literacy does not involve

memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential

universe—but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a

stance of intervention in one's context" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 86). Learning to

read and write is inextricably linked to remaking oneself and transforming one's circumstances

to enact social change. *Conscientization* works to illuminate the socially and politically

entwined relationships between literacy and liberation from dominance and oppression.

Although composition scholars have borrowed significantly from Freire's theoretical

framework, few have deeply considered using his dramatizations or Boal's related approach in

the classroom to raise students' critical awareness. In addition to writing, which Composition

scholars value, performance offers students and teachers an alternative way of elevating critical

consciousness. It exposes students to the hierarchies and assumptions undergirding their

experiences, including student-teacher interactions, through verbal, visual, and tactile means.

Boal's theory of the "spect-actor" helps uncover and challenge epistemological beliefs

that characterize student-teacher relationships in the composition classroom. In line with

Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education, Boal criticized established views that

distanced audiences from actors and maintained unequal power relations. In their historical and

theoretical overview of Boal's work, theater scholars Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz

acknowledge the influence of Freire's critique on Boal's thinking: "Boal translated this idea into

a theatrical context with his concept of the spect-actor, who replaces the spectator sitting

passively in the dark watching the finished production. As Freire broke the hierarchical divide

between teacher and student, Boal did so between performer and audience member" (3).

Traditionally, audiences, like students, have been kept literally and figuratively in the dark,

especially in terms of producing and shaping knowledge for wider consumption. Freire's

theories argue for a dialogic relationship between students and teachers in which both groups act

as co-contributors and co-producers of knowledge in the classroom. Students become subjects in

their social and political surroundings instead of objects, or "depositories," of knowledge

(*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 58).

Augusto Boal's methods work to achieve similar purposes by inviting audiences into the

dramatic action of a play and empowering them to act rather than be acted upon by oppression

and imbalances of power. In this way, audience members, or students in a classroom, participate

in processes of meaning-making instead of being led by the interpretations of others in

authoritarian positions, including actors, directors, teachers and playwrights. More importantly,

Boal's techniques offer a practical attempt at resisting the "banking" model in the writing

classroom. The breaking down of hierarchical relationships between students and teachers, like

between audiences and actors, facilitates the merging of experiences; it cultivates a

transformation in thinking and acting, which for Boal is crucial in bringing the changes

developed within "forum theater" into the outside world. Boal's approach encourages the

inclusion of multiple voices and viewpoints, without limiting the range of perspectives to that of

teacher, or actors, alone.

Over the years, drama educators, social workers, and psychologists have recognized this

potential in Boal's methods, and have adopted "forum theater" to school settings. In *Dramatic*

Changes: Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with High School Studies through Drama, English Educator Paula Ressler describes how Boal's "forum theater" can be used to help secondary and postsecondary students work through LGBT issues and broaden their understanding of oppressive forces both in and outside the classroom. Ressler argues that "the idea of a forum is to give participants a safe environment in which to explore the social/political conflicts in their lives, find alternative ways to solve these problems, and eventually empower themselves to take action in their actual lives to end their oppression" (79). This oppression can stem from social, political, and environmental problems affecting their lives and the lives of people in communities outside the classroom, which make their way into students' writing and thinking. Here Ressler acknowledges a significant consequence of using Boal's methods, which is to motivate a change in student's thinking that can later be applied to their actions outside the classroom.

Additionally, Boal's approach provides valuable steps for helping students examine problems related specifically to writing, including circumstances that produce writing anxieties like writer's block. In a rare example of using "theatre of the oppressed" to teach writing, Composition scholars Gil Creel, Michael Kuhne, and Maddy Riggle apply Boal's "forum theater" to strategically build students' levels of confidence and competence with writing. In "See the Boal, Be the Boal: Theatre of the Oppressed and Composition Courses" (2000), Creel et al. explain how they lead students through 3-5 minute plays that address specific writing problems students identify, including a lack of confidence, low "academic self-esteem," and a driving need for "perfectionism" (142). The authors perform the plays, giving students time to analyze and reflect on what they had seen. After much discussion, the students watch the plays performed again; however, this time, they can stop a play's action at specific moments and

switch places with the performers to introduce new solutions to the situation. In these plays, the character of "student" symbolizes the position of the oppressed, while other characters, including writer's block and previous teachers, represent the oppressive forces acting on the "student." For example, one play included the following cast: student, current teacher, and the "ghostly apparition" of a former teacher (151). Within this context, students explore the extent to which they have internalized perceptions of their writing from prior teachers. They gain insight into the effects of these past perceptions, which influence how students see themselves as writers, and offer potential solutions to reduce writer's block and build confidence in their writing.

Here students engage in Boal's techniques to address problems related to writing processes and literacy practices. This article suggests possibilities for expanding applications of Boal's forum theater to help students address problems related to composing, as well as course-related topics students intend to write about, including problems facing local communities like pollution, unemployment, and education—topics that frequently surface in first-year writing courses.

X. Viola Spolin and Improvisation

Less familiar to scholars in composition and rhetoric is the work of theater educator and actress Viola Spolin, whose procedures for teaching improvisational acting continue to influence acting schools and theaters today. During the 1930s in Chicago, Spolin developed a series of performance-based techniques to educate immigrant children and adults. Later in the 1960s, the techniques she used to help people acquire literacy gained popularity as a formalized approach to learning improvisational acting. Similar to Boal, Spolin believed performance possessed transformative qualities, and when used as a process of knowing and experiencing rather than a finished product, it could change how people perceived the world and operated within it.

50

Fostering this experience of transformation was one of Spolin's major goals, which accounted for her emphasis on process over product.

While working with students at a settlement house, Spolin saw the potential of theater to teach valuable lessons about language, communication, and collaboration. She observed that when applied to classrooms, social clubs, and workshops, performance had the potential of providing students with a mode of interacting with each other, expressing themselves, and making sense of personal and collective experiences through tactile, auditory, and visual methods. In large part, she set out to train students in ways of communicating and collaborating, and not necessarily to become professional actors. Thus, her techniques, which have been adopted in areas outside of theater training, including education, psychology, and mental health, can be applied to the composition classroom to help students become more effective communicators and processors of their own thinking.

Similar to Freire and Boal, Spolin worked with people that struggled to acquire word-based literacies; however, unlike Freire and Boal, her work with immigrant populations brought her more frequently into contact with people from different cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds. This contact created a greater need for using alternative, often non-verbal, methods of communication. From 1924-1927, Spolin worked at a settlement house under the direction of social worker Neva Boyd, who established the Recreational Training School at Chicago's Hull House. This program provided educational opportunities to newly arrived immigrants through drama, group activities, and social interaction. As a student of Boyd, Spolin experienced "training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing" (*Improvisation for the Theater* 2nd ed. ix). Spolin later applied Boyd's methods to

51

her work as the drama supervisor for the Chicago Works Progress Association's Recreational Project from 1939-1941 ("Viola Spolin"). Boyd's methods emphasize the use of verbal and non-verbal forms of communication that express thought through narrative, dance, and the dramatic actions of role-playing. Instead of relying on traditional definitions of literacy, these methods expand our thinking within Composition Studies about how to help students convey meaning, interpret understanding, and heighten their perception of collective and individual experiences. Boyd's techniques offer writing pedagogies new ways to achieve these ends through kinesthetic and aural channels of communication.

Central to Spolin's approach is a game structure, which she adapted from Boyd and later codified into a system known as "theater games." These games provide an engaging and experiential format to help students, both child and adult, address specific obstacles or problems that inhibit their ability to communicate. Put another way, these games support processes of problem-solving, which, as Erika Lindemann points out, are also characteristic of writing. In her foundational text, *Improvisation for the Theater,* Spolin explains that "any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem that needs solving within it—an objective point in which each individual must become involved, whether it be to reach a goal or to flip a chip into a glass" (*Improvisation for the Theater* 5). By solving the problem of the game, students learn ways to address much larger issues, including difficulties with communication, concentration, focus, or collaboration. Similarly, Lindemann argues, writing serves as a problem-solving tool to help students focus and communicate what they have learned about a topic or subject matter to an audience (6). Spolin's games supply writing teachers and students with new heuristics and exercises for problem-solving. Instead of being told how to solve a problem by a teacher or

outside source, students arrive at potential solutions through experiencing a performance game or exercise.

Since Spolin's games often address issues of communication that extend beyond the theater, they can be applied to composition classrooms in ways that transform students' thinking. One game that can potentially affect students' thinking about writing is known as "Play Ball." It focuses on how well students observe and respond to their physical environment, especially how this environment affects the way they move and the non-verbal signals they receive from others. To play this game, students are asked to throw an imaginary ball back and forth with a partner. During the course of the game, their teacher calls out the name of a different ball, such as a beach ball, tennis ball, or ping pong ball, and students make adjustments to their body movements to fit the new circumstances of the ball-tossing. The weight and size of these imaginary balls determine how students will employ their "body to show relationship to the ball" (Spolin 63). Students move their arms, legs, and entire bodies differently to indicate the size and weight of throwing a baseball or a basketball, for instance. This type of observation exercise fosters spontaneous interactions that involve students in kinesthetic, verbal, auditory, and visual means of communication. Students need to read and understand the physical movements of their partners and attempt to respond accordingly. If a student throws a basketball, for example, her partner should not respond with the dexterity it would take to catch a ping pong ball.

When performed in a composition course, this exercise not only encourages kinesthetic and visual understandings, but also functions as a metaphor to describe the elements of a writing situation. Students potentially gain a deeper understanding of the interactions between writers, texts, and audiences by experiencing a visual and tactile event, rather than hearing an explanation from their writing teacher. This exercise differs from other uses of performance as a metaphor

because it involves students in creating a physical, concrete representation of abstract processes. I have used this exercise with students to draw connections between the types of balls they throw to their partner, the choices they make with their hands, arms, and bodies, and the types of messages and genres they send to various audiences. Each ball has the potential to represent different writing genres, messages, and purposes for communicating. Writers make choices in the texts they create to address various audiences within particular contexts. By using this exercise as a metaphor, writing teachers can help students realize that rhetorical choices change the way audiences receive their messages. As their partners change the shape of their bodies, so too must readers alter their minds to potentially understand a writer's point of view. Using Spolin's exercise in this way, however, poses some challenges when we consider that writers communicate with an absent audience. Improvisation relies on a live, active audience that contributes suggestions and provides responses that shape the actions and decisions improv performers make. When students use improvisation in a writing classroom to explore ideas for a written text, they do not have immediate access to the responses their target audiences might have to their ideas. These audiences exist remotely and will respond to their ideas at a later point in time. What students are able to access in a classroom, though, is the reaction of their peers during improvisation, which can help students imagine ways in which their primary audience may react.[7] In spite of these challenges, using an exercise like "Play Ball" can heighten students' awareness that as writers they establish certain cues and rhetorical moves in a text to elicit certain emotional and mental responses from readers.

In addition to helping students think through abstract concepts related to composing, Spolin's approach challenges epistemological attitudes that continue to place teachers in the

---

[7] See Chapter 5 for a more in-depth exploration of these challenges.

position of delivering knowledge to students. Although Spolin did not label her approach "student-centered," she employed a method that reflects traces of student-focused pedagogies, whereby students and teachers work together on a more equal footing. She valued and emphasized "the need for players to see themselves and others not as students or teachers but as fellow players, playing on terms of peerage, no matter what their individual ability. Eliminating the roles of teacher and student helps players get beyond the need for approval or disapproval, which distracts them from experiencing themselves and solving the problem" (xv). A significant principle that grew out of Spolin's teachings is that students should not strive to seek out their teacher's approval or praise, but to focus their energy and concentration on solving the problem of the theater game or exercise in front of them. As a result, the theater games teach students as opposed to their teachers, who serve more as facilitators, which accounts for Spolin's non-authoritarian methods. There is potential here to draw from Spolin's teachings as a way to establish more student-centered writing pedagogies. In a classroom setting, however, there are challenges to this principle, especially since students are not completely free from being graded and evaluated by their teachers.

XI. Dorothy Heathcote and Process Drama

Beginning her professional work in the 1950s, drama educator Dorothy Heathcote made significant contributions to drama education that offer potential for writing pedagogies. Scholars in theater and education credit Heathcote with pioneering an approach that focuses on using drama as a medium for producing knowledge and as a process of discovery, change, and learning. In the foreword to an edited collection of Heathcote's essays, Gavin Bolton writes, "Dorothy Heathcote brought back drama to the track of pursuing knowledge" (7). While working with disabled students in secondary schools, she imagined new ways of envisioning

drama and its role in educating students with various learning needs and abilities. In her article "Drama and the Mentally Handicapped," she asserts that "all the arts have two aspects which are present in drama simultaneously- the inner structure of the process making them happen, and the outer structure of how they look when they are seen" (qtd. in *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected Writings on Education and Drama,* 149). Her thinking goes that the process, or inner work of drama, is not separate from the product, or outer work of drama, and should be looked at more closely in educational settings. This approach, she claims, allows a space to examine and reflect on process and the intervening stages of drama, and changes how teachers approach it in education. Up until the 1950s, drama in education still meant the preparation of school-wide plays and training students primarily as actor-artists in those performances. Heathcote, on the other hand, emphasized process in drama as a focal point in classroom instruction. Students and teachers could use the techniques and practices of drama to establish scenes and contexts that supported learning and growth. In other words, the final performance, or product, was no longer the driving force of drama in education.

Theater educator and drama theorist Cecily O'Neill has helped make Heathcote's approach, known as process drama, more accessible and easily adapted for teaching. O'Neill has helped popularize the term and its connections to Heathcote's work, thereby empowering its use among teachers in a variety of disciplines. Process drama entails a series of structured, improvised scenes that together create a dramatic context in which participants investigate a particular topic or scenario. These improvised scenes often take the form of role-playing in small and class-size groups, and include individual and group-based activities. According to O'Neill: "Process drama gives access to dramatic elsewheres, imagined worlds in which students may experience new roles, novel perspectives and fresh relationships. In creating and

maintaining these worlds, students construct and explore images, roles, ideas and situations. The medium of drama is available for discovering and articulating ideas, feelings and attitudes and shaping these private understandings into a public form" (141). Teachers and students participate in the creation of "dramatic elsewheres" by establishing scenes based on specific ideas or themes in which they perform as particular characters. These scenes often derive from texts explored in a classroom, including, but not limited to literary texts. When applied to the composition classroom, process drama can encourage students to work through writing projects that contend with a variety of texts and genres. Essentially, process drama offers news of thinking about a topic or text through the lens of a dramatic setting.

More specifically, process drama is built on a method of problem-solving that can supplement the problem-solving goals of writing instruction already mentioned in this chapter. Since process drama relies on improvised scenes or scenarios to explore a problem or situation, it comprises a structured, classroom theatrical experience. Like Augusto Boal's approach though, solutions to the problem unfold within the experiences of playing and acting, not based on a script or pre-determined plan established by a director or teacher. In Heathcote's work, and later O'Neill's, teachers are reminded that their position is to work "in and out of role," breaking down a hierarchy by both participating in the drama and working as a facilitator outside it. By taking on this position, teachers become part of the emergent form of process drama in which teachers and students explore an issue or topic through dynamic, interactive involvement.

Process drama holds enormous potential for writing pedagogies by creating a context in which students experience problem-solving through this direct involvement. Similar to the teachings of Viola Spolin, Heathcote's approach encourages students to "think from *within* a dilemma instead of talking about the dilemma" (119 emphasis added). Through enactment and

role-play, students actually make decisions regarding a problem or issue and act them out, rather than simply talk about the problem in an abstract, detached way. Whether examining problems related to a specific profession, as in Clark or Fischbach's research, or to an historical event, as in Salibrici's classrooms, students invent solutions and experience responses to them first hand.[8] For example, in this dramatic context, students think from "within a dilemma" by acting as a Public Health professional or persona present at a mock trial based on historical circumstances. Instead of talking *about* an audience's needs or a specified purpose, as in seeking a grant approval, students are actually "immersed" in the situation, trying out potential solutions, witnessing others' reactions, and making adjustments to their plans based on genuine, rather than hypothetical, interactions with other people. Students are exposed to a range of perspectives and experience the consequences of their chosen actions within the context of a role-play.

With the guided help of discussion and reflection in a classroom setting, students are better equipped to draw from this dramatic context information that can influence a writing project and shape their thinking about a given problem or topic. Students can directly apply what they have created in the role-play to their writing, in the form of an argument or example that was raised; or, they may find it useful to consider alternative solutions after improvising one on the spot during a dramatic scene with fellow students. While in role, students make decisions that reflect the perspective they are embodying and act from a particular position or viewpoint, rather than strictly debate or discuss an issue as themselves. Process drama supports the kind of problem-solving that writing instruction aims to accomplish; however, it does so through immersion and enactment, which can help students reach new insights for writing projects that they may not otherwise discover. It is important to remember that Heathcote's methods of

---

[8] Chapter 3 foregrounds connections between theories of process in drama and composition, and examines classroom applications of process drama in a writing course.

problem solving developed largely out of her work with students facing learning disabilities and in need of alternative ways of constructing and communicating meaning. Therefore, her methods are highly advantageous for writing teachers working with students in need of new strategies that support and challenge their abilities as writers. By incorporating process drama into our instruction, we can motivate students to utilize talents other than writing, including visual and spatial intelligences, and direct these efforts towards strengthening their writing abilities. Additionally, these methods encourage those students who demonstrate talent as writers to re-conceptualize a problem or writing task and enhance the sophistication of their thinking.

Alternative approaches, such as acting and improvisational theater, hold the key to unlocking multimodal methods of instruction and expanding an already-changing definition of performance. In recent years, composition scholars and writing teachers have come to understand performance in terms of the products students compose, like video broadcasts or speeches, as a metaphor describing students' personas as writers, and as a theoretical framework to examine the power dynamics and epistemological assumptions accompanying the roles teachers and students play in the classroom.

Studied far less frequently is the place of performance-based techniques in writing pedagogies. These procedures and exercises represent multifaceted forms of communication, as well as potential heuristics for teaching composing processes, especially invention and problem-solving. Although Composition Studies is experiencing a "turn to performance," its rotation is not complete. There exist unexplored possibilities in making performance practices part of a live and active experience in the classroom that can help students grapple with composing a variety of texts. Therefore, incorporating performance-based exercises as part of an approach to process,

and not strictly to product, can help close an existing gap between theoretical and practical understandings of performance.

The students we teach live in a world where multiple modalities not only exist, but are necessary to composing in the 21st century. Multimodal scholars remind us that definitions of composing today are no longer restricted to writing. Composing involves many modalities that require writers to attend to visual, aural, and spatial means of communicating and understanding knowledge. Since multiple ways of knowing are a necessary part of communication, fostering them in the writing classroom is essential to effective composition-based teaching. By actually engaging students in acting techniques and scenarios, we involve them in multiple modes of inquiry and invention that tap into their intellectual strengths as well as challenge them to think from new perspectives. These techniques can supplement the teaching of writing by giving students the opportunity to employ visual, aural, and kinesthetic modes of expression to conceptualize and work through writing projects. The reality that students conceptualize and think through ideas in ways other than writing is a significant notion that performance techniques help address and provide a space for discussion. Based on its interactive and multimodal nature, performance broadens the spectrum of methods used to help students learn to write and develop a repertoire of composing strategies that are print and non-print based.

It matters whether writing pedagogies incorporate "multiple channels of communication" such as Paulo Freire's dramatizations or Augusto Boal's forum theater because if they do not, writing teachers do students a disservice by promoting writing as the accepted way of knowing and understanding. Writing students and teachers miss out on opportunities of developing new ways of inventing and discovering material for writing that involve thinking from another person's stance or perspective, like in a role-play. Embracing alternative formats of thinking and

60

composing not only helps prepare students to meet 21st century communication demands, but exposes them to new intellectual capabilities, including visual and kinesthetic intelligences.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that performance-based strategies and techniques can augment the teaching of writing in ways that bolster multimodal communication. In the next chapter specifically, I foreground more conceptually diverse of ways of invention than are currently emphasized in most composition classrooms, specifically in terms of using improvisational acting techniques as invention strategies. As I hope to demonstrate, improvisational acting fosters emergent ways of knowing, instead of pre-determined forms, as well as multimodal ways of thinking, composing, and acting. This type of performance extends what student already practice in print-based pedagogies into newer contexts that help them develop the knowledge and abilities needed to become effective writers and communicators.

Chapter 2: Invention through Improvisational Acting

"Improvisation is invention—a way of making things up spontaneously, out of whatever comes to hand, or to mind." -Tony Adler, *Encyclopedia of Chicago*

Improvisation holds different artistic and philosophical meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Most often it is recognized in theater and music as a spontaneous and unrestrained form of expression. In the world of acting, improvisation indicates an unscripted style of performance that relies on the collaborative imagination of actors. These actors invent all the time. They create stories, scenes, and characters out of their own imagination and the collective creativity of fellow actors. They discover meaning and purpose out of shared experiences and moments of collaboration and engagement. By its very nature, improvisational acting enjoins individuals to work together to form ideas that are unrehearsed, and, more importantly, integral to justifying the dramatic world that is collaboratively created. Improv actors use improvised dialogue, physical gestures, and movement to construct characters and develop relationships that contribute to the setting and situation of a scene.[9] It is the job of each improviser to contribute by listening and responding in the moment to statements and actions previously made by other players. By and large, improvisation provides a valuable means of inventing material through spontaneous, imaginative thinking; however, it is not limited to the sphere of actors alone.

As a mode of discovery and method of instruction, improvisation offers enormous

---

[9] Improvisational acting is not required to be humorous; however, the humor emerges through character work and the situation of a scene that the actors establish. These scenes can also elicit other responses from audiences that are more dramatic and somber in tone.

potential for environments outside the theater, especially the writing classroom. It can be used to tap into alternative ways of knowing and experiencing the world that resonate with the purposes of composition, particularly invention. In teaching writing, Donald Murray argues, we teach "the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world" (4). Likewise, Anne Berthoff contends that "composing—in contradistinction to filling in slots of a drill sheet or a preformed outline—is a means of discovering what we want to say, as well as being the saying of it" (20). Improvisation stimulates discovery in much the same way by encouraging connections to the outside world and resisting predetermined forms, but with key differences. It invites students to explore and interact with ideas, perspectives, and people in a collaborative space, one that does not restrict invention to the abilities of a lone individual. Integrating theories and practices of improvisation into the writing classroom can serve to renew our focus on collaborative forms of invention and to infuse writing pedagogies with the possibilities of alternative modes of discovery, including speech and the body.

Moreover, the spontaneous nature of improvisational acting invites a level of uncertainty and unpredictability that can prove productive for student writers. Oftentimes, students commit to an initial idea or topic out of fear that a better one might not come along, or because they have experienced limited practice with inventing. When used in the writing classroom, improvisational acting can foster a type of in-the-moment thinking that potentially ameliorates students' fears and anxieties related to writing, while providing a space for more extensive treatment of invention. Improvisation demonstrates how uncertainty can be used for constructive ends through the exploration of and experimentation with inchoate ideas in a group setting. By

engaging students in improv techniques as invention strategies, writing teachers can cultivate a level of comfort with unknown possibilities that enriches the generation of ideas, which may, in the cases of individual students, be more or less effective than others, but to all at least to some extent, valuable in achieving the purposes of invention. This chapter explores intersections between theoretical understandings of invention in improvisation and composition, and the implications for writing pedagogies, including classroom applications of improv techniques and their effects. This chapter also provides a selected overview of recent scholarship on invention to contextualize the role of improvisation in discussions of inventional practices and to suggest a place for improvisation as a new "site" of invention in writing pedagogies.

I. Rhetorical Invention in Composition Studies: Brief Overview

Finding material to write about and develop into a coherent message is a predicament all writers face at some point when composing. Of the five canons of rhetoric, invention is charged with this task of helping writers get started, discover lines of argument, investigate multiple perspectives, and gain an understanding of a rhetorical situation. Contemporary models of teaching invention reflect competing views about invention's epistemological nature, its purposes for writers, and its value, especially in terms of heuristics used to guide writers as they invent (Lauer 2). To an extent, these views determine where teachers and students of writing locate invention, whether they direct their attention inward to a writer's individual capabilities or outwards to social contexts, including the communities surrounding writers, or both.

Contemporary composition scholars recognize the implications of locating invention strictly within the individual writer's processes without considering the role of context in invention. According to rhetoric scholars Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee, writing pedagogies that emphasize invention as originating from individual rather than communal

knowledge, often stress the canon of arrangement over invention, limiting students' experience

of and classroom attention to invention. The thinking goes that if students discover material

based on individual abilities and talents, then the purpose of writing instruction is to help them

organize and shape the material they create on their own into appropriate forms, whose features

become the guiding principles and patterns for writing. In their rhetoric textbook, *Ancient

Rhetoric for Contemporary Students,* Crowley and Hawhee acknowledge this reality of teaching

when they argue that contemporary teachers of rhetoric "too frequently begin (and end) their

instruction with consideration of forms or genres, asking students to begin composing outlines,

thesis statements, or essays" without giving adequate attention to the difficulties of getting

started (xii). Similarly, Crowley writes in *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition* that

"students typically use arrangement as their sole means of invention, thinking in terms of

composing an introduction, a thesis statement, proofs, and a conclusion- in that order" (231).

This narrow conception of invention too often limits students' writing experiences and

perpetuates the myth that writers work alone, creating and then revising a piece of writing in

isolation. It not only minimizes in-depth explorations of invention, but excludes new ways of

seeing and understanding that can contribute to the processes students use to problem-solve and

construct meaning through written text.

More importantly, this limited definition of invention represents a significant shift in

epistemological assumptions that Crowley has effectively problematized in her 1985 article,

"Invention in Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric," and later, her seminal text, *The Methodical

Memory.* In these texts, she argues that a shift from ancient rhetorical theories, which

emphasized the role of community in invention, to modern perspectives that focus on the

individual writer, presents writing as the result of internal procedures performed in the writer's

mind. It neglects the direct involvement of external influences, including the social contexts, discourse communities, and rhetorical situations that shape and are shaped by writers. In *The Methodical Memory,* Crowley maintains that current-traditional rhetoric, which emerged in the late 18th and 19th centuries, is responsible in large part for the rejection of ancient theories of invention and reflects historical and epistemological changes carried over from the Enlightenment and scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries. She contends that according to ancient rhetoric, "teaching and learning began with what people already knew and proceeded toward new discoveries by testing them against the collective wisdom" of the community (*Methodical Memory* 2). Ancient rhetoricians perceived knowledge as communal and directly linked to common beliefs, languages, discourse, and issues of public interest. Therefore, ancient theories of invention advised rhetoricians to consider what the community knew, believed in, and agreed upon when inventing. Current-traditional rhetoric, on the other hand, elevated the mind as a source of knowledge and reason, and privileged the individual "thinker's perception of ideas" and "his manipulation of the relationships between ideas" (Crowley 5), giving less attention to social and communal factors affecting how individuals perceive and construe knowledge. As a result, current-traditional pedagogies stressed form as the focus of instruction since content emerged from the individual writer's mind. Crowley notes the damaging implications of a model that focuses too heavily on an individual's thought processes: "Since these processes were assumed to be natural to all normal persons, the model tacitly assumed that any thinking student should be able to get her writing right on the first go-around. She needed no assistance with invention proper; indeed very little could be given her. What teachers could do was lecture about how a finished discourse should look, if it were to accurately reflect the uniform, 'natural,' composing process put forward in current-traditional

theory" (147-148). Invention became, as Crowley suggests, a "collapsed" composing process of "select, narrow, and amplify" (148). Teachers of current-traditional rhetoric assumed student writers would be able to "select" a topic for writing, likely from a teacher-generated list, "narrow" down their vast array of personal experiences to an item or moment that fit the topic, and then "amplify," or develop, it into a thesis for a piece of writing, all the while contemplating little about the role of outside communities and contexts in invention.

More recently, in "Taming Multiculturalism: The Will to Literacy in Composition Studies," Peter Vandenberg reminds us that subordinating context to the teaching of universally-applied processes and procedures risks promoting a monolithic understanding of "good" writing and homogenizes important social and cultural differences among student writers and across writing situations (545). This kind of approach gives students the false impression that a universally-learned approach is capable of addressing all their invention needs, and will produce uniform results every time despite the context, audience, and purpose of writing. Students develop a relationship with preferred ways of knowing, captured within *the* writing process, which minimizes diverse ways of thinking and communicating that they might bring to our classrooms, and that could influence a variety of approaches to invention. As teachers of writing, we need to be aware of the epistemological assumptions shaping our instruction, and consider how focusing on individual, rather than communal, practices of invention can reduce explicit instruction on invention and minimize students' development of a range of invention strategies.

To a large extent, scholars in composition and rhetoric recognize a second force influencing this perceived break from ancient rhetoric: expressivist rhetoric. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, expressivist rhetoric promoted the individual writer as a primary source of

invention and idea generation for writing. In Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk's essay collection *Taking Stock: Reassessing the Writing Process Movement in the 90s,* Robert Yagelski, describes expressivism as a "theoretical perspective on writing that focuses attention on the writer as meaning-maker and on writing as self-expression and self-discovery" (206). According to this theoretical approach, writing becomes a process whereby individuals record personal thought and responses to personal experiences. It is important to acknowledge here that expressivist pedagogies provide significant attention to student choice in writing, narrative, and voice, which are crucial in making writing meaningful and engaging for students. However these pedagogies run the risk of doing so at the expense of neglecting the roles of audience, community, and collaboration in writing. They are built on epistemological assumptions that eclipse the social nature of writing and underplay its role in communicating a message to an audience, and establishing a relationship between writer, audience, and topic. By experiencing strictly individual over contextually-driven approaches to invention, students learn the importance of developing capacities of self-reflection and internal analysis. Students are less inclined, though, to understand the social construction of invention or to experience the impact of collaboration and outside feedback on their writing.

Donald Murray has helped establish a view of invention as a mode of self-discovery and personal expression. In his advice to teachers, Murray explains, "the student finds his own subject. It is not the job of the teacher to legislate the student's truth. It is the responsibility of the student to explore his own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning," and "the students are individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way" ("Teach Writing as a Process Not Product" 5-6). Murray's conceptions of writing process and process pedagogies here leave little room for explorations of invention as tied to contexts outside the

writer. Likewise, Peter Elbow argues that writers should not depend exclusively on an audience to provide the impetus and material with which to write. In "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," he questions at what point in composing writers should consider their audience, and maintains that writers would benefit from "the ability to *turn off* audience awareness- especially when it confuses thinking or blocks discourse," at earlier stages of composing (56 italics in original). While too much attention to audience may prevent students from getting started, relying heavily on their individual abilities to invent inhibits collaborative forms of invention, especially when we consider the classroom as an important community students can draw upon when inventing.

Although expressivist rhetoric minimizes the role of community in invention, it does not ignore it entirely. James Berlin, who discusses the ideological implications of different rhetorical approaches, acknowledges the presence of community in this theoretical framework. But he reminds us in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class" that "the community's right to exist, however, stands only insofar as it serves all of its members as individuals. It is, after all, only the individual, acting alone and apart from others, who can determine the existent, the good, and the possible" (486). Therefore the community occupies a position relative to the individual, whose perceptions influence conceptions of thought and knowledge. In place of expressivist rhetoric then, Berlin argues for a social epistemic rhetoric that underscores how the individual, society, and material circumstances influence each other in a dialectic relationship such that assumptions about knowledge production respond in different ways to dominant ideologies (488). Social epistemic rhetoric, he claims, provides the tools to expose these ideologies and resist traditional power structures that empower some individuals and disenfranchise others. This socially and culturally-minded element of rhetoric is missing from pedagogies that fall short

of fully locating invention in contexts outside the individual writer and motivating students to not only consider their audience's beliefs during invention, but actually engage with communities of writers and audiences as they discover material for writing. The assumptions behind these pedagogies influence where we locate invention with our students and the degree to which we seek alternative locations that support communal ways of thinking and are rooted in other disciplines and fields. Improvisational acting, with its theoretical and practical focus on community-building, can help restore a link to ancient rhetorical theories, provide more extended treatment of invention, and reaffirm social acts of invention that support collaborative processes of discovery.

II. Locating New Sites of Invention: Recent Scholarship

To suggest a place for improvisation within invention research and scholarship requires a look at recent developments that have opened the field to what Janice Lauer describes as new "sites" of invention. The emergence of these sites is due in large part to the "social turn" in composition and rhetoric, which scholars recognize as taking place during the 1980s and 1990s. In their edited anthology *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers,* Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon grant the importance of this turn, or shift, in permitting an understanding of knowledge, writing, and discourse as social and situated. It directed our attention outside the boundaries of the individual writer to study the rich contexts that inform writing. Citing the work of key scholars in the field, these authors write: "This attention to writer-in-context, often referred to as composition's 'social turn,' inflected composition scholarship with questions about the nature of knowledge (Bizzell; Bruffee), the relationship of writing to communal interaction (Bartholomae; Nystrand), and the larger societal functions of writing instruction, including its potential to assimilate students into

70

unacknowledged relations of unequal power (Berlin; Trimbur)" (3). This turn outwards to studying the social and epistemological aspects of writing presented scholars and teachers of writing with new disciplinary contexts for invention. In "Rhetorical Invention: The Diaspora" (2002), Janice Lauer argues that in recent years "rhetorical invention has migrated, entered, settled, and shaped many other areas of theory and practice in rhetoric and composition" (2), including Writing in the Disciplines, Writing Across the Curriculum, cultural studies, gender studies, and technology (2-10). Later, in her 2004 book *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition,* the first in a series of reference guides, Lauer credits theoretical movements outside of Compositions Studies, including deconstruction, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and feminist studies, with contributing to this migration of invention to new theoretical and disciplinary sites. Scholars influenced by these movements, she argues, "critiqued the notions of unified coherent subjectivities and individual agency, theorizing that discourse constructs writers. They argued for social conceptions of invention and introduced collaborative practices" (116). As a result, scholars moved away from thinking of the writer as the central locus of invention, which was often the case in current-traditional and expressivist rhetorics, and considered the discursive practices influencing the writer's position.

More recently composition scholars have located new sites of invention in theories surrounding genre, memory, and the archive, which has opened research to new conceptualizations of where to locate and utilize invention. Amy Devitt, Charles Moran, and Wendy Bishop have played significant roles in conceptualizing genre as a form of rhetorical action; however, genre scholar Anis Bawarshi has been instrumental in establishing genre as an important site of invention. In his 2003 book *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, and earlier publications, Bawarshi asserts

71

that genres assist in constituting student subjectivities, signify certain cultural practices, and provide a discursive space in which students invent. In a recent anthology of composition theory, he writes that "Invention takes place within and between these genred spaces . . .When they write their essays, for example, students are expected to perform a discursive transaction in which they recontextualize the desires embedded in the writing prompt as their own self-sponsored desires in their essays" ("Sites of Invention" 106). Put another way, students invent their positions as writers by reforming the expectations of their teachers, laid out in documents like the course syllabus or writing prompt, as their own. Similarly, Kathleen Ryan and Barbara Biesecker discuss the role of memory and the archive respectively in providing new discursive sites of invention. Writing for *Composition Studies* in 2004, Ryan conceptualizes rhetorical memory as more than just transcribing past events, but as a vehicle for students to reinvent and re-imagine by using "rememoried knowing" as a way to "transform understanding" (42). Biesecker, on the other hand, focuses on issues of national memory in her 2006 article "Of Historicity, Rhetoric: The Archive as Scene for Invention," in which she argues that archives serve as literal and figurative sites of "our collective invention," and allow us to remake and reinvent national histories and identities (124).

This brief survey of recent scholarship on invention serves to highlight newly theorized sites of inventional practices; but more importantly, it suggests possibilities for an additional site that, until recently, has been overlooked in composition and rhetoric: performance, specifically improvisational acting. This potentially new site, which represents multidisciplinary relationships between theories in composition, rhetoric, theater, and feminism, calls specific attention to the body as a source of invention and its role in providing alternative, multimodal practices for invention. Participants of improvisational acting use their bodies to create as well

as convey information by establishing characters and situational circumstances in scenes based on what they perceive and observe through the verbal and non-verbal reactions of other people. The practices of improvisation position the body as mode of communication and epistemology.

III. Body as a Site of Invention: Influence of Feminist Scholarship

Acknowledging the body as a site of invention is not a new idea; however, improvisational acting renews attention to the body, which is especially important in print-based pedagogies that often de-emphasize bodily and emotional ways of knowing. Prominent arguments in feminist and composition scholarship offer inroads into validating the physical and emotional modes of thinking characteristic of improvisation. In her critique of traditional, patriarchal notions of epistemology, feminist scholar Philippa Spoel argues for "revalidating and reformulating the body's role in the generation—not only the communication or delivery—of rhetorical knowledge" (200) and for "re-integrating bodily, emotional ways of knowing into the process of invention; that is, into the process through which rhetors and audiences generate together socially and historically situated knowledges" (201). Spoel's argument here contributes to an understanding of how physical and gestural movements of improvisational acting do more than "communicate or deliver" meaning: they help generate knowledge in ways often overlooked, or worse denigrated, in the academy given Western, patriarchal perspectives of the body as feminized, irrational and illogical in comparison to the mind, which has been traditionally depicted as masculine, rational, and logical.

In Composition Studies, scholars like Andrea Lunsford, Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, Karyn Hollis, and Elizabeth Flynn have taken up these perspectives, which contribute to a "mind-body

dualism" (Spoel 200), and consider their effects in terms of women's composing practices.[10] In "Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism," Lunsford, Ede, and Glenn argue that in their inventional practices "woman have also sought to include the intuitive and paralogical, the thinking of the body, as valuable sources of knowing, as sites of invention" (412-413). Their research calls attention to practices that have been previously undervalued and rendered invisible, and in so doing, helps broaden the canon of invention to include the body as a mode of interpreting experience. In related scholarship, Elizabeth Flynn cites the work of Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule to emphasize how "male experience has served as the model in defining processes of intellectual maturation. The mental processes that are involved in considering the abstract and the impersonal have been labeled 'thinking' and are attributed primarily to men, while those that deal with the personal and interpersonal fall under the rubric of 'emotions' and are largely relegated to women" (427). Ideologies that perpetuate this division not only continue to subjugate women, but also exclude emotional and bodily forms of intelligence and epistemology that feminist and composition scholarship has worked to re-coup.

Disrupting a mind-body dualism that feminizes the body and devalues other ways of knowing that draw from emotion, sensation, and intuition is significant to an understanding of improvisation as a site of invention. Continued belief in this dualism threatens the power of the body as a source of generating knowledge and its place in processes of invention. By extension,

---

[10] See Lillian Bridwell-Bowles's essay "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy" in *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric,* and Elizabeth Daumer and Sandra Runzo's essay "Transforming the Composition Classroom" in *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity* for discussions of feminist scholarship in composition and rhetoric, including investigations into women's discursive practices and relationships between the body and narrative. In *Women's Ways of Knowing: Development of Self, Voice, and Mind,* Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule present valuable research into women's development of knowledge and examine connections between epistemology, the body, and language.

it threatens the value of improvisational acting, which relies on the body as a mode of expression and meaning making, in place of linguistic-centered methods that value print as the primary method of invention. Critics of bodily and emotional ways of knowing may dismiss improvisational acting as a source of producing evidence, existing outside perceived domains of reasonable and logical information. Knowledge, as Spoel suggests, is not only socially constructed, but also embodied, resisting a cultural desire to separate mental from bodily experiences, as well as reason from emotion, sensation, and intuition. Improvisation as a site of invention elevates the role of the body in providing alternative, multimodal practices for invention, which motivate students to use non-verbal intelligences, including bodily-kinesthetic intelligences, which are often minimized by conventional print-based approaches to invention (Gardner 17). Identifying improvisation as a site of invention introduces theories and practices from disciplines outside of Composition Studies that can help us reformulate how we understand the role of the body as well as collaborative forms of invention.

IV. Understanding Improvisational Acting as a Site of Invention

Improvisation can help transform writing pedagogies by restoring a link between communal and bodily ways of knowing and invention that is emphasized less often in contemporary rhetorical theory. Improv actors, better known as players in improv-comedy, employ these ways of knowing to create never-before-seen moments and interactions on stage that culminate in the development of scenes. Part of the appeal, for players and audiences alike, is the unpredictability and ensuing excitement that accompanies improvisation. Amy Seham identifies this unique quality of improvisational acting, which she argues, permits actors to break free of the constraints that accompany working with a script. Her 2001 book *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* traces a useful history of improvisational acting, while critiquing the treatment of

75

women and other minorities in improv circles. In this text, which is shot through with personal

and professional insight, she writes, "improv's magic lies in its spontaneity and virtuosity—the

illusion of a comic scene created from thin air, with actors anticipating each other's every move,

spouting punch lines 'too good' to be improvised. Audiences delight in its sense of danger and

potential failure as they enjoy the escape act or the high-wire routine" (xx). Both players and

audiences of improv witness the unfolding of a scene as it happens, knowing full well that the

plot and characters have not been pre-planned backstage, and that the outcome of a scene's

actions is unknown and could potentially fail to make its mark. For better or worse, the scene

itself, which can go in any number of directions based on the players' decisions, will never be

performed again. This temporality fuels the players' spontaneous actions. It encourages a sense

of freedom to openly experiment within the confines of a scene, which can last anywhere from 2-

3 minutes to upwards of 40 depending on the troupe's style of improvisation. By inviting this

openness and uncertainty into the writing classroom, students and teachers have the opportunity

to discover, invent, and experiment with ideas before immediately funneling them into pre-

determined forms or modes of delivery. Invention becomes a means of engaging with

spontaneous thinking and interacting with other players/writers to achieve unplanned results.

Uncertainty as a Generative Tool

When done well, an improvised scene showcases the players' abilities to invent under

unpredictable circumstances, while exhibiting comfort and confidence with uncertainty. The

more players resist this uncertainty and fear of the unknown by relying on preplanned jokes and

material, the quicker they will run dry of ideas and the scene will fail. To the untrained eye,

scenes that may seem chaotic, disorderly, or erratic, are in fact moments in which players are

listening to each other and working through the uncertainty to justify each other's decisions so

that they fit within a scene. This perceived chaos is a critical part of invention in improvisational

work. When teaching writing, however, the practice of inventing is rarely defined in these terms.

Typically students work intensely to avoid any uncertainty, especially when inventing material

for writing. Ann Berthoff maintains that "our students do not like uncertainty (who does?); they

find it hard to tolerate ambiguity and are tempted to what psychologists call 'premature closure.'

They want the writing to be over and done with; unfortunately, much composition teaching

encourages those feelings" (22).

Research on writer's block suggests that students are uncomfortable with and possibly

unwilling to entertain uncertainty. They tend to favor assigning order to the chaos and confusion

that can accompany invention, even if it means shortchanging their ideas. In her discussion of

writer's block, Irene Clark cites the work of James Adams, a scholar of engineering and design

whose perceptions of risk-taking influenced thinking about writer's block and other mental

blocks in the 1970s. In his book *Conceptual Blockbusting* (1974), Adams argues that when it

comes to generating ideas and problem-solving, people often possess "no appetite for chaos" due

to a fear of risk-taking and mistake-making (qtd. in Clark 83). This fear, Adams asserts, bears

cultural, environmental, and intellectual roots that motivate people to perpetuate conventional

thinking, rather than to invent more freely. They tend to resist embracing the complexities and

inconsistencies that accompany new thought patterns, even though these inconsistencies often

prove to be necessary. Adams's book, which has seen several editions over the years, suggests

alternative ways of overcoming barriers to thinking that are rooted in psychology, philosophy

and art. It attests to the fact that people can prevail over obstacles that impede creativity in ways

other than writing. It opens up possibilities for using improvisation as a generative tool for

writer's block.

77

Years later, Mike Rose studied the phenomenon of writer's block with undergraduate student writers. In his research, he asserts that students struggling with writer's block often possess a fear of straying from inflexible, prescriptive rules that don't allow them the freedom to respond to different writing situations with adaptable strategies. These emotional and intellectual barriers belie the more accurate picture of "false starts, unfruitful beginnings, contradictions, and dead ends" that real writers experience (Berthoff 22) and convince students that they must "get it right" the first time. Where these approaches and attitudes block creativity, improvisation presents an opportunity for students and teachers to perceive uncertainty and mistake-making as necessary components of invention.

Placing students in a classroom environment that resists right/wrong thinking and cultivates spontaneous interactions promises to enrich theories and practices of invention, specifically because it helps generate risk-taking. Acclaimed improv teacher-directors Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson advise improv players to embrace the likelihood of failure and making mistakes in their pursuit of improvisational acting. Known for their work with the Second City Theatre in Chicago, a leading theater in the practice of improvisation, Halpern and Del Close especially are credited with revolutionizing American comedy. They helped establish a credible training ground for improv actors that continues to influence the development of improvisational acting today and has seen the likes of Alan Arkin, Alan Alda, Dan Akkroyd, Gilda Radner, James Belushi, and more recently, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, pass through its halls. In their 1994 foundational book, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation,* Halpern, Close, and Johnson outline guiding principles and techniques of improvisational acting and assert that "honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention" (15), which implies a level of risk-taking. Rather than rely on trite jokes or

celebrity impressions to generate laughter, they argue, players are encouraged to invent based on the reality or "truth" of a given moment. Novice improv performers especially often resist this approach to invention out of fear of failure and anxiety, which can lead to missteps and stalled scenes. In front of an audience, these missteps may be embarrassing and discouraging; however, in learning to invent by taking risks, they are not only unavoidable, but indispensable. Missteps can drive productive thinking and draw attention to moments in which alternative choices and courses of action would have been beneficial to a scene or train of thought. During improv rehearsals, perceived missteps provide opportunities for pause and discussion about what players could have done differently to move a scene forward or explore an idea in greater depth. Missteps in a rehearsal space pose less of a risk of embarrassment or disappointment than during a live performance; yet, it is important for players to embrace missteps and uncertainty at all times and to view these supposed blunders as opportunities for ideas to grow and develop with the help of fellow players, rather than moments to resort to pre-determined ideas or scenarios.

Furthermore, within improvisation, "mistakes often lead to more interesting discoveries" (Halpern, Close, Johnson 149). They prompt players to make different decisions that affect the direction of a scene, how other players will react, and where the scene will go. Learning to accept and use mistakes as part of invention helps cultivate a sense of freedom to take risks among improv players. Ignoring this link between missteps and invention can prove fatal not only for improv players, but student writers as well. Trying out new ideas, perspectives, and conceptual ways of thinking requires a level of confidence and comfort with the likelihood of failures, however small or large. Resisting this aspect of invention forecloses future discoveries and stunts the growth of current ones. It also prevents students from embracing failure as productive and envisioning the possibility of discovering new ideas by examining "missteps."

79

Students, like improv players, can potentially generate new and alternative ideas that emerge once an opportune moment has passed them by. For example, once a scene is over, improv players may think of alternative choices or actions that they could have used to strengthen a scene or establish a relationship between characters. Unlike improvisation, though, which rests on the present moment, writing allows students to make use of these alternative ideas on a present product through revision. Students do not necessarily have to wait until the next writing occasion to try out or incorporate these ideas. Without being given the opportunity to consider failure as generative, students potentially learn to produce writing that is stilted, unadventurous, and above all safe. Student writers can learn much from improvisation, which is designed to break down barriers that stifle creativity and lock players into predetermined forms and responses.

i. The Structure of Improvisation

Although improvisation is largely characterized by spontaneity and an openness to experiment, it is not without certain agreed-upon principles and structures that guide invention, much like the purposes behind heuristics for teaching invention in Composition Studies. Viola Spolin, the creator of theater games and the leading figure behind improvisation as a form of acting, was one of the first teacher-directors to formally theorize improvisation. She documented the structures that continue to shape the teaching and learning of improv today, and introduced actors to a structured way of playing and imagining that grew out of her social work with immigrant children and adults in the 1930s. Spolin devised a method of acting that emphasized the importance of play, intuition, and spontaneity, which were missing from other acting techniques that neglected play and stressed a more serious disposition. Years later, at the request of her son, Paul Sills, also a famed director of improvisation, she brought her method of teaching

to actors of the Second City theater in Chicago. In her influential book *Improvisation for the Theater,* Spolin outlines the structure of her approach, which consisted of theater games, or a series of exercises and games meant to solve specific problems related to the theater, including concentration, movement, and sensory experiences. In this text, she argues that play functions as an important way for children and adult actors to become "organically involved in a problem" (7) and approach it from multiple perspectives, rather than work from outside it with limited understanding. According to Spolin's theory, being immersed in a problem encourages processes of experiencing, which in turn allows for spontaneity, a crucial element for discovery and invention: "Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression" (4). Read within the composition classroom, spontaneity can allow students to "re-form" themselves as writers and break with prescriptive rules and form-driven models of writing that represent "handed-down frames of reference." When faced with pedagogies that emphasize form over content, students are left searching for ways to fit their ideas into predetermined structures and genres, rather than exploring organizational patterns and connections that best support the synthesis and elaboration of their ideas.

The capacity to invent material is crucial to the writing classroom, and requires students to move beyond formulaic approaches to writing. By being spontaneous, students are able to generate new lines of argument and insights that shape content and structure. One reason they

are able to do so is that spontaneity encourages students to respond more authentically without the pressure of producing an expected reaction. In his work with actors, British teacher-director Keith Johnstone observed the freedoms of spontaneity, which became the focus of his teaching. Much like Viola Spolin, Johnstone approached teaching drama and improvisation by stressing the importance of being in the moment of a scene or interaction. He discouraged actors from thinking ahead to a future moment and emphasized full consideration of what is happening in the present. He started to formulate these ideas in the late 1950s as the director of the Royal Court Theatre in London, and they gained popularity in the United States in 1970s and 1980s through his involvement with the Second City Theatre (Seham 36-37). In his 1979 book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre,* which was well-received, he foregrounded the importance of spontaneity and expression, and drew specific attention to elements of status and social expectations that inhibit a player's performance and interactions with others on stage: "when you act or speak spontaneously, you reveal your real self, as opposed to the self you've been trained to present" (119). Spontaneity, he contends, temporarily releases actors from social constraints that often direct responses in daily life, but hinder a fuller exploration of spontaneity.

Similarly, students face a host of social constraints that govern their behavior and actions in the writing classroom. When asked to speak "off the cuff," students must respond without being given the opportunity to think through and plan their reaction. They are less likely to adhere to the social scripts they have "been trained to present." Operating under these circumstances, students momentarily are compelled to let down their guards, take risks, and break free from what they think their writing and thinking should look and sound like. The pressure to respond immediately and spontaneously prevents students from censoring their own thoughts and weeding out ones they perceive as "wrong" or ineffective. Johnstone notes that

actors often engage in this process of self-censure, which thwarts creativity and takes time away from the action of a scene: "You have to consider your thought, decide whether it gives you away, and then distort it, or replace it with something else" (119). Students approach invention for writing in a similar way, often changing their ideas to reflect what they imagine their writing should convey given the perceptions and institutional forces governing the classroom environment, rather than what they want to communicate.

Spontaneity in improvisation also requires a release of conscious control, either from within the individual player as an inner source of judgment, or from without in the form of an authoritarian teacher-director, who also represents larger institutional forces. Spolin describes improvisation as a form of letting go, not being held to a higher power of approval such as the praise of a teacher. A player's freedom to play and be spontaneous is "interrupted by our need for favorable comment or interpretation by established authority" (Spolin 7). This need prevents our ability to experience "the moment of personal freedom," which is so crucial to spontaneity (Spolin 4). The same applies to teaching writing in that we need to help students imagine other audiences for their writing and to invent without the constant pressure of pleasing the teacher. Although the constraint of earning a grade is inescapable, this approach directs attention away from the teacher and places greater emphasis on what students are able to conceptualize and create.

While this type of spontaneous thinking holds immense value for disrupting the ways students are trained to think and act in a classroom, it also raises significant concerns and drawbacks that need addressing. The same spontaneity that compels students to shed social constraints and present a more authentic version of themselves may in fact carry consequences, especially for students entering our writing courses with home languages and literacies that are

devalued, or worse silenced, by institutional forces. Put another way, this spontaneous thinking

may not be as liberatory or transformative as one might hope. In "What is Literacy," James Gee

reminds us that while in school students learn to negotiate discourses that are socially

constructed and associated with institutions outside family and home cultures. As writing

teachers, we need to be aware of the processes inherent in this negotiation. We need to realize

that at the same time we encourage students to invent freely, they are learning to master

"secondary discourses" related to school literacies that for many differ from their home

languages or "primary discourses" (Gee qtd. in Vandenberg et al. 34-35). Revealing a more

authentic self during invention may potentially harm and disempower students if we are not

aware of how their primary discourses are perceived by teachers. Similarly, in "Inventing the

University," David Bartholomae maintains that knowledge of discourse communities is

significant for students, especially basic writers, to be successful in academic communities.

Upon entering the university setting, student writers must learn to communicate using various

languages, conventions, and habits of mind that characterize academic discourses (623). To

employ improvisation in the classroom more effectively then, writing teachers need to examine

how the challenges students face in acquiring academic literacies may hinder their ability to fully

embrace improv as a form of invention. The spontaneous thinking that improv calls for may be

more damaging to students by pointing to differences in language, ethnicity, education, race,

gender, and class. If we enjoin students to be less constrained by an academic persona, we need

to realize the potential consequences therein.

ii. "Yes, and" as Acceptance and the Believing Game

Invention in improvisation thrives within a culture of acceptance and receptiveness.

When integrated into the writing classroom, this culture can foster an environment that resonates

with Peter Elbow's believing game. It can transform the ways students approach texts, ideas, and habits of thinking by encouraging them to accept different viewpoints and consider alternative perspectives in a valued intellectual exchange, not one riddled with criticism or rejection. In the appendix to his 1973 book *Writing Without Teachers,* Peter Elbow introduces teachers and scholars to the power of the believing game, which he argues should share equal footing with the more common method of inspecting and testing ideas: the doubting game. According to Elbow, the believing game affirms the importance of "trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them" ("The Believing Game or Methodological Believing" 2). Unlike the doubting game, which seeks to root out flaws and contradictions as evidence of intellectual work, the believing game encourages readers to place themselves inside the writer's perspective, and deliberately believe the assertions the writer makes. Elbow acknowledges that it is more difficult to see another's viewpoint than to see one's own, especially since the communities people inhabit reinforce and reinscribe these viewpoints. To doubt one's own viewpoint, he maintains, calls into question habits of mind, cultural and social practices, and structures of thinking that inform how people envision the world. Therefore it is a challenge to move outside and beyond it.

Not only does the doubting game prevent students from engaging with different views, it also prevents them from examining the flaws and contradictions in their own way of thinking. In "Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—and into the Classroom," Elbow maintains that "doubting tends to function as a way to help people fend off criticisms of their own ideas or ways of seeing," rather than inspect them by "listening to views they experience as wrong, different, odd, alien, or unfashionable" (390). Without entering into

different viewpoints, students are deprived of the opportunity to see the specific assumptions and

attitudes ingrained in their own. The doubting game promotes a detached stance of skepticism

that serves to protect and insulate students from conflicting viewpoints that might challenge their

perspective in useful, eye-opening directions. The believing game, on the other hand,

encourages students and teachers to "embrace contraries," and re-examine their epistemological

stances, as well as the possibilities inherent in new ones.

The classroom is a suitable place to practice playing the believing game. It provides a

safe and encouraging environment wherein students start by listening and accepting ideas rather

than criticizing them. More specifically, they have the opportunity to practice through an

improvisation exercise and principle known as "Yes, and," which offers a structured theoretical

and practical space apt for the believing game. Based on her combined experiences as a teacher-

director, scholar, and performer of improvisation, Amy Seham explains how "Yes, and"

functions as a guiding principle to facilitate acceptance and receptiveness in improv: "Students

are taught to respond to a fellow player's initiation by saying, 'YES*and*--' to accept the other

player's offer (or *gift*), then add to it by exploring or heightening the given idea. Players who

deny are told that they are thinking too much, setting up *blocks* that obstruct their spontaneous

response to each moment of play. No idea is to be rejected- all offers must be accepted and

supported" (xxiv-xxv). Doubting or denying what has been previously said or created among

players, delays the furtherance of the scene, or worse, stalls it. When players reject initial ideas,

relationships or scene locations, the scene cannot progress forward and risks falling apart.

Likewise, Keith Johnstone notes that "By analyzing everything into blocks and acceptances, the

students get insight into the forces that shape the scenes" (100), calling attention to their choices

and actions, which create movements and patterns in the scene. For instance, if a player begins a

scene with "Mom, I need to borrow the car Friday night," and the second player responds with "I'm not your mother," any further action in that line of thinking is denied or blocked. A more effective response from the second player would have been "Yes, as long as you've passed your Algebra test." In doing this, the second player not only accepts the offer of the first player, but enhances or builds upon it by providing a rationale or supporting detail, and moves the action forward by introducing the next line of thinking or reasoning into the scene.

In the writing classroom, Elbow's believing game functions under similar circumstances. Students respond to a text, either published or in draft form, by accepting the writer's perspective, or "offer." They then place themselves inside it, like players would a scene, and "get farther and farther into it, see more and more things in terms of it or 'through' it, use it as a hypothesis to climb higher and higher to a point from which more can be seen and understood- and finally get to the point where [they] can be more sure (sometimes completely sure) it is true" (*Writing Without Teachers,* Elbow 163). The metaphor of moving "farther and farther into it" and rising "higher and higher" mirrors the processes of elaborating and building upon ideas in improvisation. Instead of evaluating the strength of an argument or idea by locating gaps or weaknesses, the believing game, much like "Yes, and," motivates students to entertain new ideas and suggestions as valid, meaningful, and significant. Arguably, when a writer's idea, perspective, or choice is denied or doubted, the piece of writing is stalled and neither the writer nor reader move forward. Although the doubting game has been recognized as productive, its ubiquity prevents students from experiencing other modes of response.

iii. "Yes, and" as Invention Heuristic

It is important to engage students not just in the philosophical underpinnings of "Yes, and," but actually involve them in the application of this principle, and the believing game, as an

invention heuristic. By participating in "Yes, and" as an improv exercise, which improv players use to practice accepting rather than blocking offers, students can find material to write about, generate potential lines of argument and insights, and collaborate with others by using speech and their bodies to communicate. Put another way, students participate in a physical dramatization of Elbow's believing game. They visibly take part in a game or exercise that prompts them to agree with a beginning statement, regardless of whether or not they actually believe or agree with it, and build upon it for at least the duration of the exercise. Students are compelled to believe a stance or viewpoint, "dwell within it," and advance the stance by contributing something new. In the exercise, students are introduced to new viewpoints based on their partner's suggestions and must then take on a different standpoint to move the dialogue of the exercise forward. Students' unexamined assumptions and attitudes are brought to light and shared, as they confront their own perspective and consider where it aligns and diverges from other perspectives with which they are presented. Socially students are trained and taught that such activities represent acts of weakness and a giving in to an opponent, rather than processes that allow them to see an idea or issue as someone else sees it and then act on it. In this way, students accept differing viewpoints as valid and legitimate, without prematurely judging or rejecting them. The openness of "Yes, and" fosters experience with the believing game and with responding to others' ideas in a way that is cooperative rather than combative.

When writing, students can use the "Yes, and" exercise as an invention strategy to generate ideas for a piece of writing. Typically, this exercise requires two or more players to engage in a dialogue that begins with an initial statement about a topic or story idea and continues with each player providing a statement beginning with the phrase "Yes, and." Each player listens to what was said previously, accepts it, and then adds to it by completing the

sentence. Players are discouraged from using the words "but," "except," or any other word that would negate or deny a previous idea. Since the dialogue is unscripted and spontaneous, it can go in a number of directions, which is encouraged and motivates multidirectional thinking. What follows is an example of how "Yes, and" might be integrated into writing instruction. For this illustration, imagine that students are asked to respond in writing to their university's plan to eliminate student parking on campus. Instead of starting the exercise with a story idea, students working in pairs or small groups begin with a statement that makes a claim based on the rhetorical situation.[11] The "Yes, and" exercise may appear as follows:

> Student 1: The university should not reduce student parking.
> Student 2: Yes, and students need to park close to their classes.
> Student 1: Yes, and students need to get to class on time.
> Student 2: Yes, and not miss important material, like quizzes or notes.
> Student 1: Yes, and do better academically.

In doing this, students collectively explore the topic of campus parking from a perspective that likely mirrors their own, while generating a number of potential reasons against the university's decision, which they can use in their writing. Moreover, students branch out in their thinking, and move beyond the immediate inconveniences of limited parking to account for impediments to their academic success. Next, by completing the exercise with an opposing viewpoint, students have the opportunity to develop counterarguments and invent material based on a perspective different from their own:

> Student 1: The university should reduce student parking.
> Student 2: Yes, and build a new recreation center.
> Student 1: Yes, and host sports or events on campus.

---

[11] This starting statement could be generated as a class, so that all students begin the exercise in the same way, or while working in pairs or small groups, students could devise their own starting sentences.

Student 2: Yes, and draw crowds from off-campus.
Student 1: Yes, and the campus won't be so empty on weekends.

As students speak, listen, accept, and add to what was previously said, they amass a collection of reasons and insights that could potentially inform their first draft. Moreover, they collectively explore an opposing stance by tapping into the varying perspectives of their partner(s).

The "Yes, and" exercise functions as a site of invention and collaboration. Invention occurs between and within the moments of exchange and dialogue, which establish a discursive space. When students respond to each other, they reform their partner's contribution (idea, reason, or counterargument) as their own, or the larger group's, and then build on it, providing nuance, depth, or a new direction. Students take on the reasoning and motivation embedded in their partner's response and momentarily assume them as their own, believing as much as possible in the validity of their partner's contribution in order to add to it. It is important then for students to understand "Yes, and" as both a heuristic and a mindset, since it provides a method of generating ideas, reasons, and counterarguments, while offering a way of thinking about them and their effects. Much like the believing game, "Yes, and" serves as a methodology and philosophy that can help students examine questions, ideas, texts, arguments, and situations.

V. Improvisational Invention and Community

Embracing improvisation as a path to the believing game also highlights social and collaborative conceptions of invention. In "Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—and into the Classroom," Elbow writes that the believing game supports communal aspects of thinking that cannot be reached through the "individualistic" nature of the doubting game: "The *process* by which the believing game works for this goal is highly *communal* rather than individualistic and certainly more communal than the typical process in

90

critical thinking. The believing game asks for maximum cooperation in order to achieve

maximum differentiation. We can only play the believing game well if we do it collectively or

cooperatively" (393 emphasis in original). Elbow argues that people need to "*cooperate* in

exploring divergent views" and by working together, agreement on the "best view" will surface

(393 emphasis in original). In practice and theory, improvisation is similarly built on the

importance of community and collaboration. At its core, it resists the creation of individual stars

over the success of a group. For improv players, invention is tied to the development of

communal knowledge, which includes the shared experiences, memories, facts, and points of

reference that players collectively contribute to the group's imagination. Spolin maintains that

"Improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group

agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes and plays" (9-10). When

individual players position their needs or ideas above the group's, a scene inevitably weakens or

worse, fails. By attempting to direct a scene alone, an individual player imposes a single idea on

the group and blocks all others, thereby violating the key principle of acceptance and cutting the

scene and other players off from what the community could provide. Success within

improvisational work depends on the interactions of players who listen to and trust each other,

accept and transform each other's ideas into the group's ideas, and share responsibility and

power.

This form of group agreement, known as "group mind" in improv, is an essential aspect

of invention and discovery. Unlike other types of comedic performance, like stand-up, for

example, improvisation promotes the talents and contributions of a collective whole, rather than

the quick wit and delivery of a single performer. According to Halpern, Close, and Johnson,

"When a team of improvisers pays close attention to each other, hearing and remembering

everything, and respecting all that they hear, a group mind forms" and "when a group mind is achieved, its members have a very strong sense of the group as an entity of its own, and connects with its feelings and requirements" (92). Additionally, Seham argues, group mind reflects "the entire troupe working intuitively together toward the same goals" (xxiv-xxv). In doing this, individual desires, experiences, and energies are redirected to meet the needs of the group and each other, to the extent that the group functions as the main focus of the performance. Johnstone emphasizes this point: "The improviser has to understand that his first skill lies in releasing his partner's imagination" and that "if you concentrate on the task of involving your assistant [partner] in some action, then a scene evolves automatically" (93). Therefore invention is heavily linked to the connections between players. The player's purpose is to accept and enhance another's ideas, but also to set up conditions in which his or her partner's ideas and choices thrive.

One important function of the group mind is to dismantle any hierarchical power structures that might form among improvisers and promote equal relationships that discourage the emergence of a leader. In his 2012 commencement speech at Northwestern University, famed comedian and improv actor Stephen Colbert explains that in improvisation: "You are not the most important person in the scene—everybody else is. And if everybody else is more important than you are, you will naturally pay attention to them and serve them. But the good news is, you're in the scene, too. So hopefully to them, you're the most important person, and they will serve you. No one is leading, you're all following the follower, serving the servant. You cannot win in improv." The mindset Colbert reveals is strikingly community-oriented and not competitive. It cultivates collective idea-generation and validates contributions from all players; however, the allure of media and public attention has encouraged singling out the

92

smartest and funniest performers. For serious improvisers though, the foundational purpose of group mind is to direct the player's attention and responsibility outward to the group, which on the level of a scene, is felt by fellow players. Success is measured by the achievements and outcomes of the group.

Group mind and the importance of community are defining principles of improvisation that offer potential for writing classrooms. By engaging in improv techniques and exercises, students perceive the collaborative nature of invention. They create together within the space of a classroom community that doesn't privilege individual experiences at the expense of communal knowledge and alternative views. Students experience variations in thinking and ability when working with other people, but also witness how various ways of doing things can lead to the accomplishment of similar goals. This image of composing contrasts with the romantic portrait of the lone writer, which often resides in student's minds. For many students, writing is perceived to happen only in isolation while a writer sits at a desk in a quiet room, pouring over ideas until a light-bulb moment of brilliance strikes. This idealized view of the individual writer is greatly limiting. It not only masks the complexities of invention—getting started, generating multiple ideas, wading through the morass of initial thoughts, and choosing the most effective one—but belies the reality that writers often explore ideas with others. They talk about ideas with other writers, experts on a given subject, and even close friends, before selecting the items that will shape a piece of writing. Pedagogies that reinforce this idealized view thwart opportunities for students to invent collaboratively, exchange ideas and perspectives with other students, and tap into knowledge that is communally generated and shared.

Improvisation helps challenge the view that invention is strictly a solitary act because it thrives on active collaboration and group agreement. For an exercise such as "Yes, and" to be

successful, students need to closely listen, agree upon their partner's ideas, and, more importantly, contribute new information that builds upon these ideas and collectively creates the dramatic context of a scene. Agreement encourages performers to establish the basic circumstances of their environment together by focusing their attention on themselves *and* their fellow actors. Halpern, Close, and Johnson emphasize the importance in improv of taking on the ideas of individual performers and making them part of the group's focus: "Players take each other's ideas- no matter what they are- and make them work. As we know, the actor's business is to justify. One person's idea becomes the collective idea of the group, and is therefore played brilliantly" (92). When improv performers set out to develop only their own ideas without integrating the ideas and perspectives of others, they impose a sense of control that is detrimental to group mind and to the life of a scene. They in effect deny the creative suggestions of others and attempt to direct the actions of the scene from the inside. This approach often contributes to a scene's downfall by producing conflict and disagreement among its players over essential elements: who are we, what are we doing, and where are we doing it. By performing improv exercises as invention strategies, students are presented with the chance to see how their individual ideas as well as their collaborative efforts contribute to a social context outside of themselves that supports the development of the group's success.

At its best, teaching invention involves a rhetorical and epistemological awareness of how writers invent, either through communal or individual knowledge or both, as well as the varying approaches writers employ given their subject, audience, context, and exigence for writing. It raises questions about where students and teachers of writing locate and employ invention, and to what extent their approaches reflect differing ways of knowing. Extensive treatment of invention in the classroom engenders in-depth exploration of various ideas and

94

views, as well as alternative methods of idea-generation. At its worst, however, instruction in invention can result in teaching a universal, individually-focused process that limits students' experience and understanding of invention as varied, ongoing, social, and communal. Janet Emig underscores the implications of this deficient model of composing: "If one were to believe this inaccuracy, the student-writer uncomplexly sits down, contemplates briefly what is left carefully unspecified, completely formulates this *what* in his head before writing a word, and then—observing a series of discrete locksteps in the left-to-right progression from planning to writing to revising, with no backsliding- builds a competent theme like a house of dominoes" (47 emphasis in original). This analogy of writing to building a "house of dominoes" calls attention to rigid, formulaic approaches that obscure the complexities of writing and belie its recursive nature. Writing pedagogies built on these views prevent students from experimenting with alternative approaches to invention, such as improvisational acting, that foster other ways of thinking and challenge preconceptions about uncertainty and failure. Moreover, these views perpetuate the image of student writers working alone, relying on individual capabilities without acknowledging the effects of context, audience, and discourse community on what a writer produces or how a writer thinks. This linear, individualistic model fails to account for the influx of outside influences on processes of composing, nor does it highlight invention as a social activity.

Improvisational acting can address these limitations by re-establishing a connection with ancient theories of rhetoric, specifically a view of invention that considers and draws upon communal knowledge. Certain time-honored invention strategies, like making lists, clustering ideas in visual displays, and freewriting, have proven to be beneficial to students' invention needs; however, these approaches typically neglect collaborative modes of discovery that tap

into multiple sources and perspectives. As a mode considerably underutilized in composition and rhetoric, improvisational acting cultivates spontaneous, imaginative thinking in a group setting. It demands conscious effort on the part of participants to generate, elaborate, and clarify meaning that builds on and adds to a collective supply of knowledge. Additionally, it urges students to continue searching and exploring ideas to find the most effective one, rather than commit to their initial thoughts about a topic or issue.

A major impetus of this chapter is to highlight the possibilities of envisioning improvisation as a site of invention. Doing so introduces theories and practices from a discipline and method of performance outside of Composition Studies that transforms how we might understand and teach invention. Moreover, it compels us to imagine newer techniques and processes for writing instruction, while renewing our attention to other ways of knowing. Using alternative modes of expression, such as the body and speech, is sometimes overshadowed by our vested interest in writing. Improvisational work, on the other hand, calls attention to the body in ways only introduced in this chapter. In the next chapter, I discuss improvised role-play, which is a unique element of an approach called process drama. This approach requires participants to embody and enact perspectives through the development of different personas or characters. Process drama invites students to utilize the foundational principles and practices of improvisation as part of invention. Students employ their bodies and voices to communicate and construct multiple perspectives, viewpoints, and responses to rhetorical situations.

Chapter 3: Process Drama and Role Play: Imagining New Models for Writing Pedagogies

Process, as defined in composition and rhetoric, describes both the practices and theories that inform our thinking about how writers draft, develop, and revise texts. Historically, the term connotes an influential body of research that focuses on the study of writing process to better understand what experienced writers actually do as they compose.[12] While process remains a "given" in our field,[13] process pedagogies have faced significant criticism for: (1) promoting a rigid, linear view of writing that moves writers from prewriting to writing and then revising without backsliding, and yields "regimented product[s]" as evidence of process (Tobin); (2) teaching *the* writing process as a universal construct without acknowledging differences among writers, or the multiple processes a single writer employs across different writing situations; and (3) failing to account for the social dimensions of writing that exist outside the individual writer, including discourse communities of writers, readers, and texts (Lindemann; Bizzell; Faigley). These criticisms continue to influence the way Composition scholars and teachers write about and inform students' knowledge of process in the classroom.

Although process pedagogies support the use of invention strategies, multiple drafts, and revision, many writing teachers still uphold a familiar stage-like model that confines process,

---

[12] Research includes Mina Shaughnessey's work with basic writers, Janet Emig's analysis of twelfth grade student writers, Nancy Sommers' comparative study of revision in experienced and inexperienced writers, and Linda Flowers and John Hayes' cognitive research in writing process. In the 1980s, Patricia Bizzell, James Berlin, Karen LeFevre, Lester Faigley, and others responded to this research by emphasizing the social dimensions of writing, which they claim were not taken up as extensively in models of writing process.

[13] Victor Villanueva identifies process as a given in "The Givens in Our Conversations: The Writing Process" from *Crosstalk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition.

specifically invention, to a series of measurable products, including outlines and thesis statements. These products may attest to the activities of writing process, but limit students' understanding of it as ongoing, recursive, and purposeful. Using process pedagogy in this way minimizes students' experiences of discovery, and leaves much unsaid and unexplored about the multidimensional work essential to a process approach, especially invention. Techniques found in other disciplines, particularly theater, can help students gain an active view of process, while providing opportunities to invent collaboratively and in more rhetorically-conscious ways. Incorporating these dramatic techniques into writing pedagogies expands the kinds of processes available to students and immerses them in the social nature of writing and communicating by moving beyond the context of the individual writer.

This chapter discusses how process drama, a type of pedagogy rooted in theater and drama education, can help writing teachers address limited pedagogical models of process theories and practices, and offer students a more active and enriched experience of invention. Drama, by nature, is highly active and participatory, and dramatic exercises, including improvised dialogue and scenes, give students a chance to apply a variety of multimodal processes to writing contexts, including kinesthetic, spatial, visual, and verbal strategies, thereby enhancing their repertoire of invention practices. While working together in dramatic scenes, students deepen their understanding of how audiences influence the way writers generate and craft material for writing. The collective efforts that go into and emerge out of these scenes also highlight the benefits of communal acts of invention. The last section of this chapter will illustrate how process drama encourages the development of a "flexible writing process" by supporting reflection, or metacognitive strategies, which represents a key aspect of writing

pedagogies.[14] Through reflection, students begin to develop an expertise as writers, discerning

how and when to adapt multiple processes for a variety of rhetorical purposes.

I. Reactions to Writing Process Models in Teaching

Critics of process pedagogies argue that early interpretations of process theories and

models in writing classrooms advanced a stage-like view of writing that ignored its recursive and

variable nature. Writing instruction based on these interpretations may reinforce a reductive

view of writing. In *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers,* Erika Lindemann asserts that "though writing

teachers have long regarded composing as an activity that occurs in 'stages,' most stage models

are too simplistic. They do not account for individual differences among writers. They do not

appreciate the complex intermingling of activities, decisions, constraints, and goals writers

juggle" (31). Put another way, this limited and limiting model neglects differences in how

writers approach different writing tasks. Richard Fulkerson claims that "Obviously there are

many different 'writing processes'; what works for one writer may be disastrous for another, and

what works one time for Writer Jones may completely fail for her at a later time" (98).

Fulkerson's comment highlights the need for student writers to understand why and how to adapt

writing processes, especially when attention to invention, drafting, and revision varies based on

the demands of a writing situation. In her focus on college writing instruction, Anne Beaufort

identifies this knowledge of writing process as an important part of students' success with

writing, equal to knowledge of content or subject matter, genre knowledge, and rhetorical

knowledge (19). Those who teach students a linear, "one-size-fits-all" model of writing not only

---

[14] Cited in "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: Teaching Writing by Fostering Essential Habits of Mind." 2011. Web. 25 March 2013. <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Positions/Framework%20one-pager_4-2011.pdf>.

bely the existence of multiple processes, but invariably hamper students' development of knowledge that is critical to their learning to write.

Much of the criticism leveled against linear writing models largely reflects reactions to how writing teachers may have applied process theories in the classroom, and not necessarily what early researchers intended to say about writing process. Janet Emig, whose landmark research contributed significantly to early studies of process theory and methodology, understood the backsliding inherent in writing. In *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders,* she writes that "the composing does not occur as a left-to-right, solid uninterrupted activity with an even pace. Rather, there are recursive, as well as anticipatory features; and there are interstices, pauses involving hesitation phenomena of various lengths" (73-74). However, years later in his critique of process pedagogies, Lad Tobin argues that while early proponents of process, including Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and Sondra Perl, understood writing as recursive and not fixed, "much of that perspective was lost in the translation of process pedagogy into a regimented sequence that divided *the writing process* into neat stages of prewriting, writing, and revising" (11). Assuming that these versions of process pedagogy likely did occur and may continue still, writing instruction may become more generalized and rigid, yielding little room for students' understanding of multiple processes of writing. For those who taught a "regimented" process like the one Tobin critiques, writing instruction becomes less inflected with questions about the changing, fluid nature of composing processes, and hinders students' development of writing process knowledge. Consequently, students may be left with a deficit view of process and teachers are more likely to reproduce unarticulated assumptions. In practice then, what may be labeled process pedagogy may in fact be a compartmentalization of writing into distinct activities assigned to students. With this awareness, writing teachers are in a

position to change process-based teachings to broaden students' experience of a recursive process as well as expose them to multiple kinds of processes.

In their critique of process theories and research, many Composition scholars have argued that strictly adhering to certain process models as heuristics for teaching writing, without considering others, minimizes the importance of other aspects of writing, specifically social and rhetorical dimensions. In "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," Patricia Bizzell argues that while pioneer researchers Linda Flower and John Hayes recognize discourse communities and conventions in their research, their model of writing understates social context. She claims that "to let the model stand alone as an account of composing is to mask the necessity for the socially situated knowledge without which no writing project gets under way" (qtd. in Villanueva 402). In a more nuanced interpretation of their work, Erika Lindemann asserts that Flower and Hayes understood the significance of social elements to writing process; however, Flower herself acknowledged that focusing on the individual writer minimized attention to the situations surrounding writers (32). As a result, Lindemann claims, "most process models depict the writer in isolation, a solitary figure separated from the world of ideas and people that language is intended to bridge" (32). These models devalue the understanding that writers and their writing are inextricably linked to communities of people, ideas, and language outside of themselves. Both Lindemann and Bizzell's critiques suggest that if writing teachers apply the Flower-Hayes model to their teaching without taking account of the social dimensions of composing, students may develop a skewed image of the writer's position, existing apart rather than within communities, and may fail to interact with process in rhetorically sound ways. They may become less inclined to envision writing as a social practice

that involves the ways in which people create and use texts for meaningful purposes that involve communities of readers.

II. Process Drama

Nuanced interpretations of Flower and Hayes' research provide an opening for additional scholarship that continues to address elements of process theories and practices with increased attention to the social and multifaceted nature of writing. I intend to add to this area of scholarship through the work of process drama, a pedagogical and theoretical approach that exists outside the discipline of Composition Studies, but emphasizes recursive processes of invention and revision. Process drama offers the potential of opening up static, individually-driven models of writing process by creating networks, or webs, of meaning that resist a lockstep framework of discrete, self-contained parts. Pioneered by drama educators Dorothy Heathcote and Cecily O'Neill in the 1970s and 1980s, this approach focuses on a series of dramatic improvisations, which students and teachers use to invent and construct meaning, as opposed to creating a final performance for an outside audience. These dramatic improvisations usually take the form of acting exercises and activities, small and large group improvisations, and role-play, and culminate in the exploration of an identified topic, which may emerge from course readings or curricula. Unlike traditional theater, O'Neill asserts, process drama is more concerned with "the careful sequencing and layering of dramatic units or episodes," that represent "links in a web of meaning," rather than a series of events that would typically comprise a conventional play (qtd. in Taylor and Warner 37). In other words, instructors help students create "dramatic episodes," or improvisations, to deepen their investigation of an idea or viewpoint, rather than establish a series of scenes in chronological order. Each improvisation contributes to a larger framework, or "web," which represents relations between actors, audiences, and contexts. This

102

web includes recursive processes of invention and revision that overlap and influence each other as students participate in dramatic scenes and exercises that build in complexity, intensity, and focus.

To illustrate this web, it is important to turn to the work of secondary English language arts teachers, who have employed aspects of process drama to engage students with invention, inquiry, and expression.[15] Postsecondary writing teachers have yet to fully take advantage of these techniques, which offer students alternative strategies for writing. These strategies might include responding to various texts and investigating topics characteristic of First-Year Writing courses, including research topics related to issues in education, the environment, and social justice issues. In a 2009 *English Journal* article, Jason Zanitsch highlights the potential of process drama and its web-like structure by describing six instances in which he uses this approach to help secondary and postsecondary students explore LGBT issues as preparation for related reading. In his description, he explains that students first move through beginning improvisations that require them to act as themselves, and then participate in more emotionally-charged scenes in which they role-play as characters facing homophobia. For example, in one introductory exercise, students step in and outside a circle to stimulate feelings of isolation and a desire to belong to a group. Later, students apply their experience of this exercise to improvisations where they embody the role of an identified character facing alienation due to prejudice, and vice versa. These improvisations enjoin students to move back and forth between ideas and perceptions, which potentially inform their thinking, and challenge them to revise

---

[15] Paula Ressler's *Dramatic Changes: Talking About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with High School Students Through Drama*, Jeffrey Wilhelm's *"You Gotta BE the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents,* Nancy Steineke's *Assessment Live!* offer suggestions for using dramatic techniques, including role-play, tableaux, and character development, as ways for students to respond to various texts, including literary texts. These techniques generate opportunities for students to engage in collaborative invention on writing and reading assignments.

previous viewpoints. Although process drama involves a progression of instances, or "episodes," these instances encourage recursive processes of revisiting, reorganizing, and re-conceptualizing ideas. The goal is for students to construct meaning by engaging in dramatic moments that help them connect and develop ideas, rather than function as isolated units to be treated separately. Through this framework, process drama suggests a model that more closely resembles a process approach to teaching writing.

When mapped onto the writing classroom, the structures of process drama can help make writing process active, rather than static, and reinforce a web-like model similar to the one Marilyn Cooper suggests in her essay "The Ecology of Writing." Proposing a revised model, Cooper describes an ecological metaphor that describes "dynamic interlocking systems," which form a complex web of writers, readers, texts, and social contexts (368). This ecological metaphor implies a back-and-forth motion between variables, including audience and purpose, that writers must negotiate as they invent and revise their writing. Process drama suggests a similar movement as students respond to and initiate action in different dramatic scenes that individually, and collectively, address particular purposes and contexts. Using process drama to teach writing encourages students to imagine process as comprised of a network of adaptable strategies and relationships that guide writers. Students can then see writing process as meaningful and purposeful by using the techniques of process drama to problem-solve, examine multiple perspectives, and invent material, instead of producing static, measurable products, such as outlines and first drafts, which yield evidence of process, instead of engaging students with it.

In addition to its structures, process drama also helps make writing process active by activating students' multiple intelligences without restricting composing processes to print-based strategies alone (Gardner 16). This approach engages students in multiple ways of knowing that

are kinesthetic, spatial, visual, and verbal, and require them to use their voices and bodies to embody characters, communicate viewpoints, and draw connections between ideas by reacting spontaneously through improvised dialogue and action. Cecily O'Neill argues that "drama can promote an interactive and dynamic kind of classroom participation," and help students develop an "active understanding" of a topic or concept (qtd. in Taylor and Warner 99). Much like classroom debates, which require students to express ideas orally and visually, process drama encourages students to articulate the importance of a piece of evidence or counterargument through multimodal means. However, process drama deepens this type of interaction by encouraging students to also act as a specific character or audience, and communicate by using their bodies and voices in the space of a dramatic scene. Students explore various world views by actually embodying them and acting from an audience's perspective, which may be different from their own, thereby inventing and developing material that informs how and what they will write to their audience.

Providing students with opportunities to experience process, especially invention, as active and non-linear is often the goal of writing programs; however, finding alternative ways to do so is often less explicitly addressed. Improvised role-play offers one way of actively engaging students in process by involving them in experiences that help them see process, both in writing and drama, as purposeful and not product-driven. Whether in pairs or large groups, students assume roles in a fictional world they help create that mirrors real-world conditions, but provides a safe environment to experiment with choices and witness the outcome as they work together to solve a problem or dilemma explored in the fictional world (Zanitsch; Ressler). When applied specifically to writing process, role-play opens up a space for students to invent collectively by acting within a fictional setting that reflects the purposes and audiences of a

105

rhetorical situation. They respond to each other in character, generating lines of argument, claims, and evidence that correspond to the attitudes and beliefs expressed by their peers, who are also in role. For example, students may act in role as local citizens, business leaders, or government officials in a fictitious context to investigate real-world issues, like pollution or immigration, which often form the basis of many First-Year Writing research assignments.

Based on this experience, students apply processes of invention used in drama to writing processes by incorporating material they invent while in role, or observing others in role, into writing assignments they are working on before, during, and/or after a role-play. The multi-sensory processes of drama, including speech and body movement, provide students with alternatives to print-based strategies that help them discover, rethink, and embody meaning by assuming the role of imagined audiences in a fictional context derived from a writing assignment.

III. Active Process through Role-Play: A Classroom Example

During the fall 2012 semester, I conducted an IRB-approved research study with undergraduate students in a First-Year Writing course I taught at Stony Brook University. For this study, I designed a role-play to help students invent material for a persuasive, research-based writing assignment, although role-play can be used for various kinds of writing that ask students to respond to different texts and audiences. Students were asked to identify and research a local social or environmental problem and write a proposal to convince community members to take action to help solve it. Students could write to members of their neighborhood, school, or workplace communities to raise awareness and offer a feasible solution. In a published article I wrote on this topic, "Where to Begin? Using Place-Based Writing to Connect Students with Their Local Communities," I discuss the importance of this proposal-writing project, which I

assigned to students in a similar course two years prior to my research study. In this article, I argue that connecting students to real world issues and audiences allows them to explore topics that matter to them and to generate authentic responses to problems they are genuinely interested in solving. This type of authentic assignment motivates students "to see themselves as valuable contributors to local issues and agents of social change" (Esposito 71).

Additionally, this proposal-writing assignment provides rich opportunities for process drama, which became the focus of my 2012 research study. To explore the effects of process drama in a First-Year Writing course, I added a role-play to my teaching that semester to build upon the assignment and enable students to invent and develop proposal ideas that they could present to fellow students who acted as potential audiences for their proposals. Unlike conventional brainstorming strategies, the role-play motivated students to embody differing viewpoints by engaging in debate, discussion, and collective problem solving. During the study, students acted in role and were positioned to make nuanced discoveries that reflected their attention to the attitudes and beliefs of multiple audiences. In addition to freewriting and listing reasons for their arguments, as well as opposing viewpoints and counterarguments, students practiced thinking about how they would then address these viewpoints in their writing by applying what they had brainstormed in fictional circumstances to their conceptualization of the writing assignment. This type of "dramatic episode" potentially exposed students to different processes of invention that broadened their thinking about multiple sides and multiple audiences involved in an issue, and encouraged them to connect these processes to their writing processes.

Given the range of students' chosen topics for this assignment, it was difficult to address them all in one role-play during the research study; however, finding a related topic helped spark connections between the in-class role-play and their individual projects. Thus, I decided to

create a role-play based on a relevant issue facing nearby New York City: the need for increased

pedestrian and bicyclist safety. The topic connected well with several student projects and

provided common ground for many students that grew up and still live in the city and nearby

boroughs.[16] As an entry point into the topic, students read a recent *New York Times* article about

changes to the city's infrastructure, including pathways and better traffic patterns, to increase

pedestrian and bicyclist safety. In whole class discussions, students expressed personal

experiences or incidents tied to the issue and recognized key audiences based on their reading.

Of these audiences, I identified five that would be the focus of the role-play and would form the

characters students would play in role. These characters included a mayor, a parent, a bike

messenger, an elderly citizen, and the city police commissioner. Additionally, I established a

fictitious city for the role-play modeled on New York City, which provided a familiar urban

landscape. Students were assigned a character to discuss in small groups. When it was time for

the role-play, they selected one group member to act in role at a simulated board meeting that

would bring all characters together to discuss the issue of pedestrian and bicyclist safety.

Students were given the following scenario as the basis for the role-play:

> The city of Stonyville has recently experienced a rise in traffic-related deaths.
> Citizens have held protests and written letters to persuade the mayor to take action
> and address this local problem. They've argued that the city of Stonyville is not
> pedestrian-friendly and that a majority of its citizens walk and bike to work,
> school, and home. As a result, the mayor is proposing that city funds be used to
> make pathways and trails throughout the city for pedestrians and bicyclists.
> However, many citizens feel that this project is not the best use of the city's
> money and that other projects should have greater priority. Therefore, the mayor
> has decided to schedule a board meeting later today to reach a solution. The

---

[16] Several students decided to write about the need for public safety in their individual projects, including the addition of traffic lights, better traffic patterns, and sidewalks in their local neighborhoods, as well as maintaining local parks, schools, and beaches through recycling and community-wide clean-up efforts.

meeting is open to the public, and as a member of the community, you've decided
to attend and voice your stance on this problem.

This fictional board meeting, which was conducted in class, represents one form of a "dramatic episode" used in process drama. In a more extensive treatment of this approach, students would experience other "episodes" that explore this same topic from multiple angles. For example, students may act as similar characters in other contexts or scenes besides the meeting. They may create still images, or scenes, that represent the relationships between characters, or a significant moment in the characters' lives related to the issue of pedestrian and bicyclist safety. For instance, students may explore a scene in which a young child is injured due to an unsafe traffic intersection, or a scene examining the daily challenges of a physically disabled citizen traveling to work. Incorporating additional "episodes," or scenes, into process work deepens students' understanding of the motivations and decisions of specific audiences, and creates the web-like structure discussed above. Likewise, these "episodes" provide insight into the conditions and circumstances surrounding the issue. Students confront and respond to different perspectives they may not have thought of beforehand in a supportive environment before articulating these ideas in their writing to an outside audience.

For students, the role-play serves a dual purpose. In this case, it motivates students to collaboratively generate solutions to build a safer and more "pedestrian-friendly" city, and it motivates them to attempt to reach a consensus among disparate views and opinions. More importantly, it gives students the chance to practice inventing responses to multiple audiences, which was integral to their own writing once they returned to their individual projects. Details provided in the above scenario introduce students to opposing views, which compels them to consider why some audiences may disagree with projects to promote greater pedestrian and

bicyclist safety when other public issues, like crime or healthcare, need addressing. The role-play positions students to tackle the multidimensional work brought on by a wide range of responses to a pressing problem, which at first glance may seem relatively straightforward and easy to solve.

To help create the dramatic world of the role-play, students first worked in small groups to develop the backstory of their assigned character, whom they would represent during the simulated board meeting. While in groups, students invented their character's background based on information provided by the article and their own personal experiences. They collaboratively wrote a profile that identified their character's name, age, and educational background, as well as supporting reasons, beliefs, and evidence to substantiate this person's perspective. Additionally, students expanded this profile to include potential solutions they would raise while in character during the meeting. These invented solutions were framed in terms of their character's viewpoint, which, shaped by specific objectives and motivations, differed from many students' personal views on the topic. For example, in the case of the city police commissioner, students were required to support the following stance:

> Stance: The city <u>should not</u> support this plan for better pedestrian and biker safety. My department will need to devote greater resources, including police staff, to enforce traffic laws and give out summonses for drivers who don't stop at stop signs or run red lights. The citizens of Stonyville would be greater served if resources were used to fight crime and secure the safety of people's lives and property.

For many students, this stance might seem antithetical to their worldview. Oftentimes, students believe that an individual in this position would likely support a city-wide plan to increase pedestrian and biker safety. However, this type of character work positions students to not only

anticipate opposing viewpoints, but adopt them as their own, speaking as if they have had certain

life experiences that influence their decision-making.

In these circumstances where students debate and role-play, students think and act from

within belief systems different from their own, taking on the persona of someone with a

divergent outlook. Patricia Dunn argues that in this type of situation students are more apt to

participate in Peter Elbow's "believing game," which encourages them to believe a particular

argument before criticizing or "doubting" it (136). Students representing the police

commissioner in the above example needed to believe the argument that devoting additional

police resources to pedestrian and bicyclist safety would place a serious strain on addressing

other social concerns like fighting crime. Even if students personally disagreed with this view,

they needed to accurately represent it during the role-play and invent alternative solutions, like

calling on trained public employees, including crossing guards, or volunteers, to help offset the

number of police officers involved in maintaining public safety.

More importantly, playing the believing game in a dramatic context enhances students'

awareness of the value of multiple perspectives, and the importance of moving beyond thinking

of a topic or issue in binary terms. Writing programs strive to create instruction that expands

students' thought processes and prevents the creation of pro/con arguments, which limit more

complex conceptualizations. The techniques of process drama help students begin to examine an

issue from multiple sides, while amplifying their attention to new perspectives as they invent.

Jason Zanitsch speaks to the ability of process drama to cultivate multi-perspectival thinking:

"Process work moves beyond simple role-play or improvisation by opening up the potential to

explore multiple viewpoints . . . Students learn to think beyond their own point of view and

consider multiple perspectives on a topic through playing different roles. Playing a range of

111

positions encourages them to be able to recast themselves as the 'other' and to consider life from that viewpoint, thereby complicating and enabling us to explore multiple dimensions of the topic" (86). When students assume a stance that conflicts with their own, they are challenged to think differently about a personal viewpoint they have previously formulated. Although they may struggle to do this, students potentially develop a newfound level of expertise. While working in an intellectual and emotional environment built upon mutual respect and support for each other, they are open to the possibilities of diverse outlooks and the consequences of putting those outlooks in conversation. From within the drama, students experience a level of freedom to interact in ways that potentially change how they perceive the world outside the classroom, and how those changes manifest in their writing. They gain valuable information about their audience's attitudes and beliefs that will help them anticipate their audience's reaction and make key decisions as writers. Process drama provides practice in believing the arguments of others, which students can then apply to their own writing.

During process work, students engage in overlapping methods of inventing, organizing, and revising material that they can then use to approach writing assignments. On the one hand, these processes help students prepare for, participate in, and reflect on the dramatic world of the role-play. The information they construct while working on their characters is adapted and reinvented as needed. Recursive processes take place as students collect, plan for, and revise ideas as they encounter opposing opinions, counterarguments, and other pieces of evidence raised by their peers. Although students use the information they collaboratively write beforehand in the role-play, the dialogue of the role-play is mostly unscripted. Students are compelled to think quickly, improvise answers to questions, and react spontaneously while responding to anticipated and unanticipated discussion points. On the other hand, these recursive

processes influence how students approach writing projects, which they are working on at the time of the role-play. Using drama techniques as process strategies not only permits students to invent material for the role-play, but also ideas and arguments they could then take back to their drafts. Students may discover new arguments or counterarguments, or find that they need to return to the research process and locate new information to support a claim or piece of evidence brought up during the role-play. They may need to rethink and revise the plan they originally set out to accomplish a writing task. The recursive processes involved in the role-play provide a model for the types of composing-related processes with which students engage while writing.

IV. Multi-sensory and Multimodal Processes

In addition to its recursive nature, process drama supports an active view of process by engaging students in multiple modes of invention that could potentially become part of their writing process. These modes, which are not strictly print-based, contribute to the production of knowledge by tapping into verbal, visual, kinesthetic, spatial, and aural intelligences. Students are physically and mentally involved in the creation of meaning, and use their bodies and voices to communicate through visualization, talking, and gesturing. Framed by this multimodality, process drama becomes a kind of gateway into new "intellectual pathways" that benefit a range of students, including student writers who think in non-verbal ways as well as verbally competent students who benefit from using unfamiliar ways of knowing (Dunn 1). Writing teachers need to consider how physical activity, visualization, and other non-print strategies help students communicate meaning and gain new insights they might not otherwise discover using conventional print strategies.

While dialogue is a significant component of process work, physical movement and non-verbal cues are equally important as students consider how they will deliver and convey

information. Students make decisions about how they will use their bodies to accurately represent their character's views and communicate the supporting evidence they collaboratively invented with their group members. The physical environment of the role-play helps signal to students that they are entering a dramatic context that will require alternative forms of communication. To simulate the board meeting, I arranged five desks, one for each character, in the center of the room in a circle so that all characters at the meeting could face each other, while the rest of the class observed from an outer circle looking in. As mentioned earlier, students elected one member from their small groups to represent their character in the mock meeting. So as not to put only five students on the spot, students in the outer circle could switch places with their group member to help articulate a specific response or provide needed support. I acted in role as a city board member, but also facilitated discussion. To help students stay in role, I asked them to give themselves a name as their character. When I have conducted a similar role-play in other classes, I have had students put their characters' names on nametags placed in front of them during the role-play. This encourages students to not only refer to each other by character name, but helps maintain the dynamics of the dramatic situation so that students are more apt to act and respond in role.

Although students are confined to the circle formation, they can use their bodies and voices in ways that express cooperation or resistance to certain views expressed by others. For example, students may sit with their arms crossed or open, or may decide to make direct eye contact with another person or avoid it. In this way, students communicate their receptiveness or disapproval of ideas through facial expressions and body movements, and assess their peers' physical reactions to determine if a "character" is responding favorably to their expressed opinions. They can immediately see the effect of an idea or opinion on another person. Given

114

these types of physical reactions, students learn to read and interpret non-verbal cues, the extent of which influences their ability to adapt and adjust their behavior to meet their needs.

By making these physical and verbal reactions the focus of conversation both during and after the role-play, writing teachers can help raise students' awareness of connections between modes of communication. This approach can help students gain an understanding of how the physical and verbal moves they make during the role-play might compare with the rhetorical moves they make in their writing. For instance, students may find that anecdotal evidence provides a powerful pathetic appeal over statistical information by witnessing their peers' verbal and non-verbal responses. This experience may induce students to consider the effectiveness of a range of appeals based on how well other students' react.[17] In addition to physical gestures, students begin to think about how they might adapt their language to suit their audiences' needs and expectations during the role-play. For example, students may decide to use specialized language about the topic when talking to "characters" that share a similar educational background, and then employ more general terms to discuss safety techniques with the character of a young child. Such an approach gets students thinking about how they might adapt their style of writing when addressing different audiences. With the help of explicit instruction, students begin to see how the rhetorical moves used in role-play could apply to the moves they make in their persuasive writing, giving them the opportunity to expand their knowledge of writing process across contexts.

V. Stepping into a Dilemma: A Mindset

Students adopt a type of mental framework when working in a dramatic scene that also influences their writing process in ways worth emphasizing. Process drama can change how

---

[17] Although these students do not represent the actual audience, they provide a basis from which students can begin to assess the effectiveness of their ideas.

they approach a writing situation and imagine their relationship to it. By embodying a character's viewpoint, especially one that differs from their own, students identify with a rhetorical situation in new ways by shifting their perspective from outsider to insider. Dorothy Heathcote draws attention to this mindset in her description of process drama, which she argues encourages students to "think from *within* a dilemma instead of talking about the dilemma" (119 emphasis added). This distinction positions students in relation to a problem or dilemma in profoundly different ways. Rather than talk *about* a problem, like pedestrian and bicyclist safety, in an abstract or detached way, students act from within it by responding to the parameters of a fictional context, and work to reach a solution. While in role, Heathcote argues, "we think and imagine from the centre of the events through identification with not thinking about the situation. This gives us a sense of urgency, and a tension about the situation that can only be matched by events, which actually happen to us, which will affect us in reality" (149). Creating a "sense of urgency" can amplify the level of investment and connection students have with an issue or topic they may not find immediately or personally relevant, and lead to connections between how students perceive and then write about the issue. Students are given the chance to voice the concerns and opinions of different audiences as if they were their own and make decisions in a live drama that affect how they will approach the topic in their writing. Although the topic of the role-play differed from the topics of students' individual projects, students still practiced this type of mindset, which they could then apply to their own topic. Using this mental framework, students experience invention as purposeful and directed towards reaching a specific outcome. Instead of listing a series of arguments or counterarguments, students brainstorm ideas with the purpose of meeting immediate and long-term goals. The immediate goal of invention in the role-play is to reach a proposed solution, while the long-term goal is to develop inventional practices

that will help them propose solutions to the individual problems they have identified in their projects.

VI. Process as Social and Collaborative

Role-play also highlights the social dimensions of writing by inviting collaborative invention, dialogue, and inquiry, and stimulates students' abilities to invent with an awareness of audience. Process drama places students in an immediate social world built upon a community in the classroom, and by extension, an outside community reflected in the characters students play. Students experience processes of invention in new contexts by interacting socially with their peers, working together to clarify meaning and focus, in addition to using familiar prewriting strategies like freewriting or outlining. Moreover, role-playing enjoins students to consider the social circumstances of their writing by identifying more closely with the audience to which they are writing, and by understanding how writing process is connected to the needs and purposes of communicating in a rhetorical situation.

Although the role-play is a step removed from reality, it provides a context that draws students' attention to the need for audience awareness as they invent. Role-play engenders practice in examining multiple audiences as evidenced by the interaction among students, and resists imagining a "general" audience for students' writing. Oftentimes in first-year writing courses, students gain a limited understanding of audience. They typically complete school-sponsored assignments directed towards an audience of their teacher and peers, or when asked to write for an outside audience, they are instructed to write for a "general" public audience, without further consideration of the features of this audience, the kinds of people that comprise it, or even the beliefs this audience shares. As a result, audience is commonly given diminished treatment and its importance de-emphasized during the writing process. James Porter speaks to

117

this concern and the problems inherent in advising students to "consider" audience without explicit attention to audience as a "social" phenomenon. In *Audience and Rhetoric: An Archaeological Composition of the Discourse Community*, Porter argues for a "social vision" of audience in which rhetors see their audience as an active participant in the creation of meaning, instead of functioning as a passive receiver of information (xii). Porter's view acknowledges audience as an integral part of process: "This conception re-situates audience at the beginning of the composing process, imagining an audience that participates in invention, perhaps in the sense of collaboration, but definitely through existing discourse, in the social settings that provide an occasion for that discourse, and in the genres and conventions which those discourses establish" (xii). Therefore audience is not a stable concept separate from the writer, but rather a contributing force to the construction of discourse and knowledge in the context for writing.

In a very immediate sense, audience shapes discourse in process drama work as well. Students physically and verbally interact with other audiences, their peers, whose viewpoints and opinions contribute to the actions and decisions that emerge from within the role-play. Although students are not engaging directly with the audience of their writing, as in the role-play discussed in this chapter, they nevertheless experience genuine reactions to the feedback of their peers, and start to imagine how their outside audience might respond to an idea or argument they invent while in role. Viola Spolin, like Porter, contends that audience is a necessary component of process, specifically the processes of creating a dramatic experience. Audience, Spolin argues, functions as a living, fluid entity that "make[s] the performance meaningful" and serves as "part of the process called theater" (13). Role-play is an audience-driven exercise and helps illustrate the degree to which audience actively contributes to the achievement of a particular purpose or outcome. Students' reactions, including facial expressions and body gestures, communicate a

118

distinct response to what other players hope to accomplish. Students see the effects of giving nascent shape to an idea in the company of other students, which highlights the participatory role of audience during invention.

VII. Drawback to Role-play

A significant drawback of using role-play is that even with attention to character backstory and an exploration of a topic from multiple angles, students may rely on stereotypes to inform their performance in role and their consideration of audience overall. Investigating a topic and audience through character study, class discussion, and course readings, all of which contribute to the creation of a dramatic world, motivates students to put themselves in the position of another viewpoint. However, when students are not given a chance to examine and reflect on this viewpoint extensively, they are more inclined to turn to preconceived notions informed by the media and limited personal interactions. Therefore, students benefit from having multiple opportunities to place these preconceptions in conversation with other interpretations through process drama. For example, students may envision government leaders, like the mayor in the above role-play, as ineffectual or power-hungry, and may decide early on in the role-play that such a character represents an obstacle rather than an ally in solving the problem at hand. As a result, students may object to this character's decisions based on a stereotypic impression instead of listening to and "believing" the reasons behind certain decisions, like the financial obligations of installing traffic lights. Similarly, students may vilify a specific character in a role-play, or establish "good" and "bad" characters, based on prior knowledge without trying to gain an understanding of why that character might act or think in a certain way, which limits the conversation and range of possible outcomes that could result from the role-play.

A limited understanding of an audience's needs or life experiences may sway students to base their responses on a lack of information or incomplete reasoning. For example, Jacob, a student playing the role of a parent, introduced the claim that since elderly citizens are already adults, they do not require the same kind of safety measures necessary for children. According to Jacob's worldview, elderly citizens are less likely to put themselves in a position of risk due to a level of maturity and understanding. In response to Jacob's comment, another student, Ahmed, who played the role of an elderly citizen, replied with, "Children have their parents to take care of them whereas elderly people have themselves and other elderly people. . . while children have caretakers to [sic] always monitor them and provide safety, we have to watch out for ourselves a little bit more." Jacob's lack of experience and awareness of the needs of the elderly is reflected in his generalization, while Ahmed offers a more nuanced perspective, acknowledging that elderly citizens do need the same type of care as children do, despite their age. In a later interview, Ahmed shared that he approached his character's perspective based on his grandmother's daily interactions, which are often met with physical struggles that potentially interfere with her safety. Creating a character backstory allowed Ahmed to make connections between her life experiences and the circumstances of the role-play in a way that deepened his and others' understanding of the needs of people who are older and less physically capable of traveling without challenges. Drawing upon prior experiences not only personalizes knowledge created in the role-play but helps create more sophisticated interpretations of audience.

A superficial treatment of audience awareness, either leading up to or during a role-play, prevents in-depth investigation into characters' motivations and objectives, and worse, may promote students' preconceived notions about audience instead of challenging them. In his critique of audience analysis heuristics, James Porter argues that composition textbooks often

120

address what students already know about an audience rather than help them generate new knowledge. Students answer questions about their audience's educational background or life experiences, for example, but "the quality of those 'answers' is only as good as their prior understanding of the audience. Such an exercise may even have the counterproductive effect of reinforcing audience misconceptions" (Porter 5). The same can be said when using process drama as a heuristic. Questions used to develop characters' backstories may actually reinforce how students already perceive an audience, which then informs how they approach and respond to characters in the role-play. While process drama may raise students' attention to audience, it's important to consider the limits of such an approach, especially if process work bolsters prior knowledge that is inaccurate or misleading. A potential benefit of process work is the fact that it places students in contact with one another, combining a range of life experiences that together can help challenge misconceptions, along with attention to course readings, like news articles, which provide alternative readings and interpretations of topics.

VIII. Reflection through Process Drama

For students to actively engage with process in meaningful ways, they need multiple opportunities not only to explore different kinds of processes, but also to reflect upon the effectiveness and value of these processes to their writing. The improvisations of process drama provide distinct occasions for reflection that allow for deeper investigations of what works or does not work in a scene, and how students might transfer knowledge of process in this context to their writing. With practice in reflection, students are less inclined to attach the processes of drama strictly to products like role-play and improvisation, and to consider how and when they might use these processes in writing situations, especially processes in invention and exploring multiple perspectives.

Reflection is an essential component in writing instruction that helps students develop what Irene Clark identifies as "conscious awareness" of the choices they make as writers (7). In her advice to students, Clark explains that "such consciousness will help you not only to evaluate the effectiveness of your writing process and make adjustments to it but also to formulate your own 'theory' of writing" (7). Knowledge of writing process enables students to evaluate and assess which processes work well to complete writing tasks for different purposes and audiences, and learn how to adapt writing processes without adhering to restrictive, formulaic approaches. More recently, college and secondary writing teachers have identified reflection, or metacognition, as a vital part of student success with writing both in and beyond the college classroom. According to the 2011 "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," written by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP), metacognition appears as one of eight important "habits of mind" for students to develop and captures "the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge" (1). Through reflection, students "examine the processes they use to think and write in a variety of disciplines and contexts," and determine the effectiveness of these processes as they move from one instance of composing to another, thereby developing a "flexible writing process" (5). A major goal of reflection is to help students gain control over their writing and writing process, and to acquire an expertise in adapting process to meet the communicative demands of different purposes, genres, and audiences.

Integrating process drama into the composition classroom offers students and teachers an alternative mode of reflection that can lead to new insights and discoveries that influence students' content and writing process knowledge. Traditionally, reflection in writing instruction

122

has taken the form of reflective cover letters and memos that students compose after a writing assignment, or informal writing that addresses reflective questions about students' composing strategies. These typical "metacognitive products" provide students the opportunity to think about what they have composed, how they have composed it, and how the processes of composing it compare to working on other texts, including future texts (Johnson). Yet, there are benefits to engaging students in alternative, non-print methods that permit students to develop what Patricia Dunn describes as "metacognitive distance" (59). This distance, she argues, allows students to examine how they are thinking about their ideas and how to revise them throughout inventing, drafting, and revising. She explains how talking about writing, moving sections of a paper in a kinesthetic activity, and drawing a visual sketch of a written draft provides students with an unfamiliar glimpse into their composing processes. Students learn to represent organizational patterns and conceptualization of ideas in new ways that can lead to the discovery of changes they might not otherwise realize (59-60). Likewise, using process drama motivates students to consider how the visual, aural, and kinesthetic modalities of theater offer an unfamiliar lens through which to generate, represent, and revise writing. Students gain insight into the ways they are conceiving an argument, employing evidence, and affecting an audience.

At its core, process drama encourages practice in reflection. Students reflect on the content and decisions used to construct improvised scenes and characters to deepen their understanding of the dramatic context and their participation in it. Reflecting upon the choices and actions that take place in a role-play entails recognizing the motivations behind certain viewpoints and the possibility of shifting one's own position as a result. When applied to the writing classroom, this type of pedagogy provides an opportunity for students to not only reflect on the events in the role-play, but how this knowledge might influence their writing process once

they begin to draft or revise a piece of writing. However, reflection does not happen

automatically. For this approach to be effective and successful, it requires concerted effort and

explicit instruction. Kathleen Blake Yancey contends that "through reflection they [students]

can assign causality, they can see multiple perspectives, they can invoke multiple contexts. Such

theorizing doesn't occur 'naturally': as a reflective social process, it requires structure,

situatedness, reply, engagement" (19 qtd. in Johnson). In first-year writing courses, teachers

attempt to complicate students' knowledge of writing process by purposely devoting time to

reflection in a structured setting, whether through whole-class discussion or individual writing.

Process drama can augment structured reflection that is social and "situated" by encouraging

question-raising and discussion during and after dramatic improvisations like a role-play.

One technique used to foster structured reflection in process drama is the position of

"teacher-in-role," which can be integrated into writing pedagogies. Citing Dorothy Heathcote,

Cecily O'Neill explains that the teacher-in-role is more than "an external facilitator, a side coach,

a director, or a loving ally," nor is she "merely acting or joining in on equal terms with the

group" (37). The teacher-in-role strikes a balance between both positions, moving in and out of

the role of a character in the dramatic context to cultivate "a reflective and contemplative attitude

in the participants" (37). To do this, instructors temporarily pause the dramatic action of a scene

and ask students to reflect on what was communicated, either through voice or body language,

and solicit feedback, encouraging students to influence the direction of the scene rather than

dictate a prescribed course of action. The teacher-in-role fosters an investigative context by

questioning and problematizing student responses, especially the solutions they propose. This

context serves to raise students' critical awareness of the decisions they are making in the role-

play and the impact on future decisions, both in terms of the outcome of the dramatic scene and

the writing they are doing, like the writing assignment in the example discussed in this chapter.

In large part, the teacher-in-role helps structure how students are thinking about their peers'

reactions and the meaning they attach to them by pausing the action and compelling students to

consider their motivations and decisions through a metacognitive lens. To illustrate this

interaction, I include an example here inspired by the role-play conducted with my students.

This exchange reflects one student's suggested solution to creating a safer environment for

elderly pedestrians:[18]

> Student #1 (in role as elderly citizen): We need a safer place to live because we don't have anyone to take care of us. Children have parents to care for them, monitor them, and look out for them.
>
> Student #2 (in role as parent): What if we created a community where the elderly could live outside the city where it might be safer for older citizens?
>
> Teacher (out of role to all students): Would this solution get people angry? How would you feel if you were asked to move away from where you grew up? Would living outside the city be a culture shock? Or does it provide enough additional benefits to outweigh any downsides?

By stepping out of role, the instructor can address all students, not only the ones immediately

involved as characters, and solicit responses about the effects of this solution. These collective

responses, which encourage connections to students' personal experiences, inform how the role-

play will proceed as students in role consider the feasibility of the suggested plan. Additionally,

these types of reflective moments invite discussion of process that can be applied to writing

process. Whether in role or observing others in role, students discuss how the considerations

mentioned in the above dialogue might change how they approach a draft of their individual

---

[18] This dialogue is not a transcription of the role-play, but inspired by it. New to process drama, I did not pause to reflect during the role-play, but focused on reflection after it was over. The dialogue here serves as an illustration of what writing teachers might do when they assume the teacher-in-role position. The format of this dialogue is adapted from the example Cecily O'Neill gives in her article "Transforming Texts: Intelligences in Action," in which she used role-play to help students explore the lives of characters in *To Kill a Mocking Bird.*

writing projects. Students are in the mindset of sharing and commenting on ways of addressing

contrary views, which may require finding additional examples or researching new information.

By thinking and talking about the audiences involved in their own projects, which may be similar

to the ones above, students are more apt to entertain new perspectives in their writing. These

perspectives may prompt inventing new examples or revising previous arguments. Without the

type of structured reflection provided by the teacher-in-role, students are less inclined to reflect

on processes of inquiry and invention used during the role-play and the possibility of connecting

this process work to writing process. Similar to the alternative approaches Dunn describes using

with her students, process drama helps students gain "metacognitive distance" on their own

projects by engaging in reflective thinking.

Significantly, the position of teacher-in-role encourages a communal, social experience of

process by establishing students as co-producers of knowledge and altering traditional power

dynamics. Students are encouraged to take on positions of authority and expertise in process

drama and take direct part in shaping the action and movement of the improvisations. The

teacher-in-role, on the other hand, participates in the action and challenges students' thinking by

raising concerns or extending lines of argument; however, the instructor does so by valuing

student input without dominating or manipulating the action to serve a particular end. Moreover,

O'Neill stresses that students are encouraged to question or oppose the viewpoint of the teacher-

in-role given the circumstances of the drama, and "take advantage of this implicit freedom

without stepping outside the range of appropriate responses" (96). Students are instructed to

respond according to the context and circumstances of the scene and are not compelled to agree

with the teacher-in-role's viewpoint, although it is often difficult to move students beyond

conventional power dynamics. This movement requires awareness on the part of teachers and

students of the hierarchical nature of student-teacher relationships and the social and political conditions of institutional forces. O'Neill highlights a "transfer of authority from teacher to students" during process drama, and that "one example of this exchange of power is the reliance of the teacher-in-role on the advice of the students" (97). During a role-play, for example, the instructor reinforces this "transfer of authority" by soliciting student input and helping students to see that their roles are important and not secondary to the instructor's. The teacher-in-role represents a key reversal in epistemological assumptions by placing value on students' contributions. A major goal of the role-play is to discourage students from thinking they need to divine the "right" answer, and that drama not only personalizes knowledge but opens it up to numerous interpretations and perspectives.

By promoting practice in reflection, process drama can help students strengthen their abilities to apply or "transfer" knowledge of process across various contexts. Students engage in focused reflection that compares the processes of composing in one medium, drama, and another, writing. The goal of developing metacognitive abilities in students is to draw their attention to the decisions they make and strategies they use as writers so that they are better equipped to approach the next writing situation. Students strengthen their competence as writers by developing multiple processes they can adapt in response to unfamiliar genres and writing tasks. Composition scholars recognize the importance of helping students develop the ability to effectively "transfer" knowledge of writing process. Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, proponents of "teaching for transfer," argue that writing teachers cannot possibly teach students every genre or piece of writing they will ever encounter (556-557). Instead, writing teachers can broaden students' expertise as writers by engaging them in discussions of how and why to apply knowledge of writing process to different contexts. Process drama helps foster the reflective

strategies and mindset necessary for "transfer" and helps students begin to understand the usefulness of an adaptable writing process, one that serves their purposes as writers, rather than a strict set of products used for assessment.

Writing process is not the same for all writers, nor is it the same for writers all the time. Pedagogies that challenge stage-like models and resist dividing process into items on a checklist begin to provide students with a more accurate depiction of what writers actually do. For students to continue to engage with process in active and meaningful ways, they need multiple opportunities to explore different kinds of processes and adapt them to meet the needs of diverse writing contexts. Process drama can offer these opportunities by promoting alternative forms of invention and revision that through dramatic contexts, set up purposes for invention and the exploration of multiple perspectives. Using process drama in a classroom setting is not a new idea, as evidenced by the work of O'Neill, Heathcote, Zanitsch, and others. But it holds potential for college writing classrooms that have yet to fully expose students to multi-sensory strategies that enhance the discovery and conceptualization of ideas and perspectives.

When drama is applied to a process approach of teaching writing, several important outcomes can happen that are worth emphasizing. First of all, students are introduced to a variety of processes to create meaning that are not restricted to conventional, print-based methods. As a result, students broaden their repertoire of strategies to include multimodal and multi-sensory methods that tap into different intelligences, some of which are more closely aligned with how students think and interpret meaning. These strategies open students up to new intellectual tactics to developing lines of argument that are familiar and unfamiliar to a range of students. Dramatic techniques, like role-play, provide a springboard for discovering new ideas and imagining new approaches to inventing material for writing. Secondly, students engage in

processes that are recursive and help them think through and revise nascent ideas that they explore in one context, like a dramatic scene, and apply in another through writing. Role-play invites students to see process as meaningful by giving them a tangible goal like problem-solving or proposal-raising, which influences these recursive processes. Students revisit and revise material as they come into contact with multiple solutions suggested by their peers.

Another important outcome is that participating in a dramatic context demonstrates to students how process serves as a network of strategies that writers depend on that contribute to communal and social acts of invention. Students develop a greater awareness of how writing functions as a means of acting in the world by engaging in exercises that require collaborative interaction. Students are more apt to think of writing as affecting an audience, whereas thinking of it exclusively in terms of individual activities minimizes the influence of outside circumstances on their ability to invent with rhetorical purpose. Process drama provides an entry point into discussions about the social dimensions of composing, including the effects of multiple audiences on language practices, the nature and creation of knowledge, and textual production. The procedures of process drama highlight these social dimensions and give rise to occasions for textual production that invite meaning making and reflection in communal environments. In his study of secondary students and their reading practices, English educator Jeffrey Wilhelm describes using drama as "an effective technique for achieving entry into a textual world" and offers "a meaningful mode for moving around in that textual world, making meaning of it and in it, and of observing and reflecting on the world and its meaning" (145). The same can be said of using process drama in a first-year writing classroom with college students, who, like their high school counterparts, struggle to learn new ways of responding to and creating texts. Process drama enjoins students to explore the textual world created by a

rhetorical situation by "moving around in" it through the use of characters and dramatic situations, like a mock board meeting. First-year students involved in a role-play make meaning in and out of the world they establish based on their reading of a contemporary issue or topic. They then extract meaning from the textual world of the role-play to inform the textual production involved in a writing assignment. The dramatic contexts of process drama then provide insights into other textual worlds. Students reflect on how meaning constructed in a role-play influences their response to other communicative tasks both in and outside the classroom.

Writing teachers committed to using multiple ways of teaching process can use process drama to help students imagine a variety of methods for invention. This approach, however, needs to be met with the understanding that dramatic techniques challenge students to engage in complex work by thinking in unfamiliar ways through new modalities. The context for this type of pedagogy can lead students to value process as an integral part of their learning to write. Through the reflective work of process drama, students are given an opportunity to exert control over the strategies and processes they use to create meaning. This control enhances students' confidence in their abilities as writers and helps them form a flexible and independent system of assessing their own writing process knowledge.

The visual, oral, and kinesthetic approaches described in this chapter outline possibilities for writing pedagogies that can help students see process as meaningful, and engage them in alternative processes of invention, inquiry, and revision. Writing teachers and students would benefit from a closer look at how the processes of this approach tap into different modes of communication and expand students' repertoire of invention strategies. Process drama represents an untapped resource into methods that motivate students to talk through ideas, test

them out in a safe context that mirrors the circumstances of their writing, and experience how

others react physically and verbally to the arguments they put forth.

Chapter 4: Using Improv to Generate and Revise Text: Results from a Classroom-Based Research Study

"THERE ARE NO MISTAKES [in improv], only opportunities." - Tiny Fey, *Bossypants*

In recent years, composition scholars have increasingly paid more attention to performance practices and theories in the teaching of composition and rhetoric; yet their focus has rested primarily on metaphorical and theoretical understandings of performance, which can greatly help students make important discoveries about themselves as "actors" within different rhetorical "scenes" of writing (Devitt et al. 3). But there are additional opportunities waiting to be uncovered when students actually participate in performance methods, especially given that Paulo Freire, Viola Spolin, and Augusto Boal all employed theater techniques and role-play to enhance literacy learning among a variety of people, including students. To bridge this gap between theory and practice in Composition Studies, I set out in the fall of 2012 to conduct a research study that would explore how improvisational acting might be integrated into a first-year writing course, specifically for the purposes of teaching invention. I focused on invention because of its centrality to improvisation, but more importantly, because students often experience less practice with invention in composition classrooms, especially social and collaborative invention practices. In their assessment of contemporary writing pedagogies, Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee have argued that greater attention to these kinds of practices is needed in writing instruction to enrich students' experiences of invention beyond the study of thesis statements, written outlines, idea webs, and written lists alone.

This chapter further outlines my IRB-approved study, which included undergraduate students I taught in a section of Stony Brook University's intermediate writing (WRT 102) course. In this study, I applied several research tools, including observations of classroom activities and whole-class discussions, textual analysis of students' writing, and interviews with students. This chapter suggests ways in which writing teachers might incorporate improvisation into their instruction based on the findings from this study, which included student performances of improv exercises and the role-play from Chapter 3. These performance methods provided students with invention strategies to generate ideas for writing and to examine the place of audience in invention. Students specifically performed improv exercises to invent material for a persuasive writing assignment, which they completed first, and then participated in the group role-play. The exercises served as the primary intervention for the writing assignment so that I might study their potential effects on students' writing and their ability to help students explore a specific topic, develop a related argument, and investigate multiple perspectives. I attempted to limit the number of performance techniques that might have influenced students' invention practices for this assignment and I conceptualized the role-play as an additional performance method for students to experience without it having direct bearing on the writing assignment. Overall this research study provides a real-world illustration of how instructors might employ several improvisational acting techniques in a writing classroom and contributes to the field's growing understanding of how students can invent and revise text by using alternative modes of discovery in addition to conventional print-based processes.

Though I limited the study to the experiences of a classroom-sized group of students, I address concerns central to writing pedagogies. Specifically, I sought answers to the following research questions:

- To what extent do improvisational acting exercises and strategies help students generate new material for a persuasive writing assignment, including new lines of reasoning, evidence, arguments, and counterarguments?
- To what extent do these exercises raise students' awareness of audience and multiple perspectives during invention?
- How might these exercises and strategies offer students and teachers collaborative forms of invention that draw upon collective idea generation and emphasize writing as social and responding to particular rhetorical situations?
- How might improv exercises and strategies tap into multiple modes of communication, including speaking, listening, writing, and moving?
- How do writing students perceive the effects of improvisational acting on their writing and brainstorming efforts?

From this study, I contend that incorporating improv theories and techniques into composition classrooms calls renewed attention to audience in students' invention practices. It also offers students and teachers unique possibilities for reinvesting the teaching of invention with multimodal approaches characteristic of 21st century communication.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research study and its participants, along with a description of the writing assignment students completed as part of the study. Next, I provide a detailed description of each improv exercise, including an explanation of how I modified each one to fit the objectives of the course and the assignment. Following that, I offer an overview of quantitative and qualitative data derived from analyzing students' written drafts of the assignment. Students composed one draft before participating in three improv exercises, which took place over the course of one week of classes, and then completed a second draft that was submitted the following week. In my analysis of students' texts, I pay specific attention to the writing of several students' drafts that reveal links between the purposes of the improv exercises and the revisions students made, and demonstrate an increased awareness of audience. By analyzing students' writing, I highlight ways in which the context of employing improvisational acting may have helped them generate text for this writing project that was not only new, but more importantly, audience-focused.

I. Overview of the Study[19]

The primary data sources for this study originate from the writing and interview responses of 16 undergraduate students enrolled in a section of WRT 102, which met twice a week for 80 minutes. This standard course helps students develop their academic writing with a focus on argumentation and fulfills the second half of Stony Brook University's writing requirement for graduation. Out of a class of 20 students, 16 students volunteered to participate in the study. Fifteen of the 16 students submitted their written drafts for analysis, and 7 of the 16 agreed to be interviewed. The fifteen students that submitted their writing were first-year students, and the one student that participated in the interview, but did not submit both drafts of his writing, was a senior taking the course before graduating.

Since most students started college that semester, a majority of them were learning how to produce college-level writing for the first time. In terms of their disciplinary backgrounds, students held a variety of academic majors: 3 students were declared Biology majors; 3 Chemistry majors; 1 Mechanical Engineering major; 1 Civil Engineering major; 1 Marine Sciences major; 1 Computer Science major; 1 Mathematics Major; 1 Business Management major; 1 Business Management double major; and 1 English major. Two students that participated in the study did not have declared majors; however, one student was listed as a pre-Pharmacology major and the other a pre-Biomedical Engineering major. Students interested in these majors need to formally apply and be accepted by the respective academic department before they can declare these areas as their majors.

Writing Assignment

---

[19] For a more detailed explanation of this study, please see the IRB-approved Protocol in the Appendix.

For this study, students wrote persuasive, research-based letters that addressed a social, environmental, or political issue of their choice and that also affected a local community. They directed these letters to a specific individual or group invested in the community and worked to convince this audience to take action to better the lives of community members. For example, students wrote to political figures, the leaders of social organizations, business leaders, and other individuals whom they recognized as having the authority and ability to effect change. I instructed students to explain in their letters the reasons why this issue needed to be addressed and the actions their reader should take to resolve the problem or issue. Additionally, I asked students to incorporate research as well as personal observations to support their argument. By writing these letters, students worked towards raising awareness of the issue and motivating a positive outcome. In one instance, a student wrote to his former high school principal about the need for improved recycling efforts on the school campus. The major goals of the assignment were twofold: (1) to provide students with the opportunity to learn ways of adapting research and argument to meet an audience's needs and expectations; and (2) to practice inventing reasons and solutions that address a real-world problem. Since the assignment was part of the course curricula, all students in the class wrote letters, which I graded for course credit using the same criteria and rubric from the study. My analysis of student letters, however, reflects only those students who volunteered to participate in the study.

i. Procedures

In this study, students volunteered as research subjects and while there was no formal control group, their writing before and after the improv exercises served as a type of control. Students submitted two drafts of their persuasive letters for qualitative and quantitative assessment. When I evaluated their writing, I removed their names from both drafts and

identified them by their Stony Brook University ID numbers.[20] I evaluated students' texts by

using an IRB-approved rubric I created that identified the following scoring criteria: audience

awareness, a specific position or stance on the issue, supporting reasons, the inclusion of facts

and examples, anticipated counterarguments, organization, an understanding of genre, and design

or use of conventions.

Before students began writing the first draft of their letters, I encouraged them to

brainstorm using conventional, print-based strategies in and outside of class. I explained to

students that they could employ whatever strategies they found helpful or useful in the past,

including written outlines, freewriting, lists, and clustering, and assigned the first draft of their

letters to be written outside of class. Once students completed and submitted this first draft, we

spent one week, or two class sessions, working with three specific improv exercises, "Word

Association," "Yes, and," and "Rewind." While students performed "Word Association" as an

entire class, they performed "Yes, and" and "Rewind" in assigned pairs or 3-person groups and

interacted with different members of the class each day of the study. Students were asked to

listen and respond to the prompts of each exercise, which I explained verbally at the start of

every class session and, in the case of "Rewind," with a hand-out. During class time, but only

after each exercise, I instructed students to write whatever material they remembered from the

improvisation that had a lasting impression on them and that might be helpful when they

returned to their letter drafts for revision. By providing a wait time before students could

document their ideas and thoughts, I hoped to encourage a steady flow of spontaneous

conversations between students. I advised them not to interrupt the dialogue of the exercise to

produce a written transcript of each other's responses so that they might better focus on listening

---

[20] See Appendix for a copy of the IRB-approved rubric and related handout.

to their partner and reacting spontaneously to new ideas. So often in class discussions and

collaborative assignments students place greater focus on their individual contributions,

sometimes out of fear, a lack of confidence or a lack of awareness, without actively listening to

the responses of others. In my study, I encouraged students to engage in improvised dialogue for

the purposes of increasing spontaneity in their inventing and motivating them to listen and react

to each other. In my observations, however, I noticed that many students did not always

maintain a steady conversation during the improvisations. Some paused the improv exercises

because they did not know what to say or appeared nervous to speak off the cuff, while others

stopped to record ideas and information they found useful for their assignment. In future

iterations of this study, I plan to encourage students to create a digital copy of their improvised

conversations using audio-recording software on smartphones, iPads, laptops, or other devices,

so that they might more fully engage with spontaneous processes of discovery.[21]

For this study, the improv exercises and verbal responses students contributed functioned

as tools for re-thinking and revising their writing. After students completed the exercises, they

wrote a revised draft of their persuasive letters outside of class, which I collected and evaluated

using the same rubric I applied to the first version of their letters. The improv exercises served

as the only in-class brainstorming strategies we used in between letter drafts, allowing students

to respond to each other's texts and develop ideas through the guidelines of the exercises, which

prompted verbal feedback instead of written commentary.

During my research, I also recorded and studied students' reactions and perceptions of

using improvisational techniques, including the role-play, as methods for invention. In Chapter

---

[21] I would like to thank Dr. Ken Lindblom for introducing me to the idea of using iPads to record students' responses during the improvisations.

5, I discuss some of these reactions, which I gathered from interviews I conducted and audio-taped with 7 students. These students agreed to volunteer their time to talk with me about their experiences.[22] I planned for the hour-long interviews to take place the week directly following the improv exercises, and after students completed the writing assignment and the group role-play. However, due to unforeseen effects of Hurricane Sandy, which affected major regions of Long Island in October and November of 2012, I held these interviews in my campus office 2-3 weeks after the originally scheduled dates. While the interviews were unexpectedly delayed, the audio files and transcripts from these meetings with students provide insightful information about how students interpreted aspects of improvisational acting, including principles of acceptance and collaboration. Students shared their reactions to thinking quickly on their feet and performing in front of each other. They responded specifically to the challenges of being spontaneous and having to take risks in improv since they were advised not to pre-plan or rehearse their responses beforehand. They were compelled to make decisions in the moment, which became a touchstone in students' responses in their interviews and revealed ways in which improv influenced their ability to invent ideas and to imagine outside perspectives using new modes of thinking.

II. Improv Exercises

The improv exercises I used in this study represent techniques new to most students; yet, they provide a unique opportunity to explore alternative strategies in conjunction with conventional methods such as freewriting, clustering, and outlining. Using improv as a tool for invention can offer students new insights into their topics and drafts that they might not discover with more typical approaches. These insights might come in the form of new lines of inquiry,

---

[22] See Appendix for a copy of the interview questions I used in the study.

research, patterns of organization, and evidence that may help them achieve purposes for writing.

I argue that these exercises also underscore an accepted assumption in writing studies: that

invention, as well as other writing processes, should be seen as socially situated and represents a

form of social activity characterized by the interactions between writers, readers, and texts

(LeFevre; Lauer). Students do not often think about the social situation surrounding a piece of

writing, or the influencing rhetorical factors of context, genre, message, audience, and purpose.

The world of improv stresses a vision of invention as existing within a highly social, communal,

and active situation. Improv actors typically invent collaboratively through active engagement

with each other physically and verbally. Many improv training centers, teachers, and actors rely

on methods of speaking, listening, and physical movement to explore ideas in meaningful,

audience-driven contexts. By helping students experience these kinds of methods in a writing

classroom, I hoped to engage them in communal processes of invention, while fostering a social

vision of writing that encompasses the work of many writers collaborating in live, rhetorically-

driven circumstances.

Adopting improv strategies and exercises for a writing classroom refocuses our attention,

along with our students', on invention through the same lens of social context and audience.

Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford et al. speak to this reinvigorated focus by explaining how

studying performance practices and theories within Composition Studies "makes delivery

interactive" and "turns the idea of audience into something concrete and participatory" (228).

These authors point out that improvisational acting is a largely untapped resource that can foster

these types of dynamic and "participatory" understandings of audience. As a response to their

call and my own observations about improv, I involved my students in exercises that allowed for

the "interactive delivery" of a jointly created text, or conversation, that developed from oral,

140

visual, kinesthetic, and spatial ways of thinking. The creation of this collective text serves to highlight the role of audience in invention. It allows students to work with a live audience comprised of each other, and actively contribute ideas that are then listened to, internalized, and built upon to develop new information. On another level, improv helps students realize and understand that acts of communicating ideas are not one-dimensional, moving from their position outwards, but rather multi-dimensional. Ideas emerge, take shape, and become reformed with each new response students give as they work together.

In my study, I specifically adapted three improv exercises to allow students to use alternative modalities to invent while developing an understanding of the social dimensions of writing. These exercises exist as staples in the world of improv: "Word Association," "Yes, and," and "Rewind."[23] They offer improv actors, as well as student writers, practice in developing spontaneity, creative decision-making, risk-taking, and listening, and their value stems not only from helping actors access alternative ideas and perspectives, but also from helping them accept and elaborate on divergent views presented in arguments or topics they are exploring. I intended for these exercises to help students develop a multifaceted view of their assignment topic by inventing and thinking through ideas in an environment of collaborative brainstorming. All three of them encouraged quick, unrehearsed responses from students so that they would continually engage with each other in an improvised conversation or scene. This continuous dialogue prompted students to produce an array of unplanned responses and create an outpouring of possibilities without censoring or pre-judging their ideas. Such impromptu

---

[23] Typically, improv actors perform these exercises in a rehearsal space; however, in a style of improv known as short form, players typically perform these exercises as part of a live show. In this context, performers act out different games or activities, which generate short scenes on stage. In my experience, I've performed the exercise "Rewind" as part of a rehearsal or live show, which forces performers to make different choices that introduce new ideas into a scene.

interactions can help students overcome anxiety and writer's block, an objective many

composition scholars have recognized when employing improvisational acting in writing

pedagogies (Adar Cohen; DiPirro; Fishman et. al). These interactions also engage students in the

intellectual tasks of interpretation and analysis, which function as important processes in writing

situations. Using performance methods to explore a text requires a form of "close reading on

your feet," which English Education teacher-scholar Michael LoMonico maintains motivates

students to "look closely at a piece of text and use their voices and bodies to explore the

subtleties of the author's words" (116). By applying this method of close reading to a variety of

texts in a writing classroom, students can offer physical and verbal interpretations that allow for

active investigation and critique of a text's argument, or central focus, through speaking,

listening, and moving. In the next section, I highlight ways in which three improv exercises help

students more effectively interpret and critique arguments in their own texts and the texts of

others. I designed these performance techniques to emphasize different aspects of students'

writing and to introduce them to new ways of generating ideas, exploring multiple perspectives,

and inventing new patterns for organizing and revising writing.

i. Improv Exercise #1: "Word Association"

Students participated in "Word Association" as a beginning exercise that involved the

entire class each day of the study before students performed any of the other exercises. I tailored

"Word Association" so that as a class we addressed possible topics students might be working on

for their writing assignment; however, unlike with the "Yes, and" and "Rewind" exercises, not

every student's topic was explored using this technique. Instead, I focused primarily on giving

students practice in generating ideas spontaneously by speaking in front of others and working

collaboratively as improv players would do during a rehearsal or performance.[24] To begin

"Word Association," I usually ask a student to suggest a problem or issue on campus that we

might explore in the exercise. This problem may be a student's actual topic for the letter-writing

assignment or another issue affecting students, faculty, and/or staff. Very often students suggest

the issue of poor food quality on campus, which is typically met with overwhelming agreement

from the rest of the class. Next, we all stand in a circle and designate one person to suggest the

first word of the exercise to identify the topic and spark further ideas. To help ease any

uncertainty or discomfort students may be feeling, I typically provide the first word, which in

this case is usually "food." From that moment on, each student in the circle contributes a one-

word response inspired by whatever word they hear spoken by the student standing to their right.

The exercise moves in a clockwise fashion until every student has had a chance to contribute. In

the past, students have responded with some of the following words, which are not in any

particular order: "ingredients," "taste," "gross," "options," "health," and "pricey." I explain to

students that these one-word responses provide possible sub-topics or sub-categories of ideas

someone writing about the issue of food quality on campus might to research and explore further.

While one-word responses are best suited for this exercise to keep the pace moving forward, I

usually allow students to offer two-word responses, if necessary, to help them pinpoint what they

want to say. For example, students may respond with phrases like "no variety" or "not fresh."

Overall though, I try to encourage brevity and speed to help curb their desire to pre-plan any of

their responses and to promote spontaneity. Students are not given much time to think, plan, and

---

[24] Paula Ressler and other scholars in drama education encourage the use of beginning, or warm-up, exercises, especially when working with students new to using performance methods in the classroom. Warm-up exercises can help students overcome anxiety and insecurity and reduce the fear of looking or feeling unintelligent in front of others. Given that this warm-up exercise involves whole-class participation, it can boost students' confidence and the likelihood that they will be open to exploring ideas through unfamiliar ways of thinking.

sort through a range of possible responses. They must act quickly on their feet and take creative

risks by contributing responses that are unplanned, but that assist the group in exploring,

stretching, and elaborating on a given topic in a number of different and related directions. In

more recent semesters, I have asked students to perform "Word Association" in smaller groups,

allowing them to generate potential ideas related to each other's' specific assignment topic.

After students perform "Word Association," I typically devote class time to unpacking and

reflecting upon what they said and the ideas they took away from using this type of approach.

We usually discuss what it was like to brainstorm with other people by receiving and giving

unplanned responses, and how these responses shaped and broadened their thinking. In this

context, students not only reflect on their individual ideas, but draw connections with other's

ideas, which help construct a more nuanced understanding of a particular subject matter.

Improv exercises like "Word Association" introduce students to alternative invention

strategies not typically practiced in writing courses that stimulate thinking through other

intellectual capabilities. While standing in a circle, students use their bodies and voices to

express and communicate ideas. As a result, the entire class benefits from the rare opportunity of

pooling together the auditory, verbal, spatial, and kinesthetic strengths of individual students,

who also benefit either by contributing their talents or pushing themselves to think in different

ways. Given these advantages, this exercise could also be adapted to meet the purposes of other

types of assignments, including textual analysis assignments in which students are interpreting

and critiquing ideas, arguments, and texts. Writing teachers can employ "Word Association" to

help students explore and understand a concept or term relevant to a specific text or argument.

This exercise offers ways of supplementing conventional reading and writing practices with

multimodal approaches that students can use to analyze, investigate, conceptualize, and compare texts.

While "Word Association" provides students with significant opportunities to practice inventing spontaneously and in new formats, it can also help writing teachers and students establish a sense of community. Improvisational acting relies on communal acts of knowledge-making, and large-group exercises contribute to those processes by encouraging actors to actively engage with each other and direct their focus to the creative development of the entire group. Practicing these elements of effective improvisation in "Word Association" helps prepare students for the collaborative and creative tasks involved in other exercises that deepen their exploration and critique of texts and arguments. According to the principles and structures of improv, "Word Association" is designed so that a multitude of improv performers can explore an idea as a community and contribute to the diverse imaginations and perspectives of others. Students are presented with an opportunity to understand how their individual responses contribute to a larger, collective accumulation of ideas, which in this instance emerges from a social form of invention.

ii. Improv Exercise #2: "Yes, and"

The second exercise, "Yes, and" can be described as both an exercise and a philosophy. It teaches improv performers important lessons about acceptance and agreement that extend into all aspects of improvisational work. Without these principles, the creative wheels of group improvisation would come to a grinding halt. Improvisers need to be able to accept and agree upon the circumstances of a scene or exercise in order to create a shared and believable reality. As an exercise, "Yes, and" can help improvisers build these essential skills. To perform it, two or more players begin a dialogue that forms the basis of an improvised scene. One player starts by

making a statement that establishes a story idea, setting, and/or relationship between characters, and then another player replies by adding information that will help enhance this dramatic context. For example, Player #1 might say to another player, "Hey mom, I love spending family vacations at the beach." Player #2 listens to what has been said and responds with "Yes, and your father loves to swim in the ocean."[25] The new information from Player #2 helps move the scene forward, while deepening what Player #1 has already established. Player #2 accepts the reality of a mother and child on vacation at a beach and adds to the audience's knowledge of the family by introducing an imaginary father and his penchant for swimming.

In a different version of this scene, if Player #2 said, "I'm not your mother. We're at the office," she would be rejecting all of Player #1's suggestions and denying the reality and characters Player #1 has tried to establish for the scene. In improv, effective performances result from the creative input of all players and the ability of everyone to work together. Accepting a player's creative choice adds to the collaborative model of group improvisation and helps accomplish three important purposes that guide an improv performance: (1) it opens the door to other creative choices that help develop a scene, instead of stall it; (2) it affirms the decision-making power of all players, whose job it is to help build and justify each other's suggestions; and (3) it helps create an atmosphere of trust and support so that all players develop the ability to take creative risks, which is essential when acting without a script. Improv teachers Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson speak to the importance of acceptance as the

---

[25] I have played a variation of this exercise during improv rehearsals in which Player #2 repeats Player #1's entire statement before adding any new information; this encourages Player #2 to listen and re-state Player #1's idea before contributing a new idea. For instance, in the above example, Player #2 would say, "*Yes*, you love spending family vacations at the beach *and* your father loves to swim in the ocean." This small variation can make an important difference in providing players with focused practice in listening to each other before turning their attention to what they will say next. Listening and repeating also helps players internalize an idea, and envision it as belonging to the entire group instead of any one person.

lifeblood of improv work: "Everything is accepted, treated respectfully and, most importantly, used. The other players treat all ideas as if they were their own, and take turns building on them. There is an unspoken agreement between improvisers on stage: You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house. You wouldn't bring in your own entire house and slap it on top of mine. Together, moment by moment, we create a scene" (52-53 italics in original). The metaphor of building a house aptly reflects the cooperative nature of invention in improvisation. All players must work together by accepting and adding to each other's creative decisions, which requires shared responsibility and ownership of the ideas that emerge from these interactions. A scene cannot survive on the creative vision or plan of one player. The goals of the group take precedence over any individual's vision and each player contributes in valuable ways to the dramatic content and framework of a scene through agreement. Keith Sawyer, a prominent educational psychologist, argues that improvisational acting is built on the "collaborative creativity" of actors and provides unique insight into the nature of human interactions (62). In his 2001 book Creative Conversations: Improvisation in Everyday Discourse, he describes the collective input needed from multiple actors to build an effective improv performance. He writes that "Because of the creative possibilities at every line of the dialogue, neither actor alone can decide what will happen and then impose the decision on the other actor" (13). When improv actors attempt to direct a scene from the inside by denying the creativity of others, they hinder group improvisation and potentially halt the progress of a scene. To return to Halpern, Close, and Johnson's house-building metaphor, these improv actors would rarely move past the stage of finding a location to construct their house.

As a way of incorporating these principles into writing instruction, I adapted the exercise "Yes, and" as an invention strategy so that students could generate material for their persuasive

letters by working collaboratively to accept and build ideas. I designed the exercise to support

students' exploration of new arguments, evidence, and counterarguments, while fostering a

greater awareness of audience during invention. I hoped that by being exposed to their peers'

perspectives, students might better envision possible viewpoints held by the imagined readers of

their letters. Before starting the "Yes, and" exercise, students wrote down a statement that

reflected a central claim they wanted to make in their letter.[26] This statement formed the basis of

the exercise and provided the initial line of dialogue. Students worked in pairs, or small groups

of three, and took turns exploring each other's statements by using the framework of the

exercise. For example, one student would start the exercise by reading her statement aloud and

then a second student would reply by saying "Yes, and" and then add new information inspired

by the original claim. This new information might include a sub-topic of the original claim, a

reason to support it, an example, or a side-note. Once the second student had a chance to

respond, the first student would reply with "Yes, and" and then add a new statement to the

conversation. As with any improv exercise, the added material helps to move the conversation

forward and continue exploration; there are no "right" or "wrong" responses. Together, students

created a structured conversation of about 4-5 different statements that responded in some way to

the original claim or each successive claim that followed. To help maintain a continuous flow to

the conversation, I instructed students to accept and believe each of their partner's suggestions

even if they did not personally agree with the original or successive claims they were exploring.

After each iteration of the exercise, a new student would offer his or her written statement and

---

[26] In Chapter 2, I provide an example of how instructors might integrate "Yes, and" into their writing instruction to explore ideas, arguments, and multiple perspectives for a persuasive writing project. I describe the example of asking students to respond in writing to their university's plan to eliminate student parking on campus. It helps if the statement students write is opinion-based rather than factual so that students might find it easier to generate supporting reasons or evidence, or more easily engage with the topic overall.

the exercise would begin again. All students had a chance to use their written statements in the exercise to brainstorm ideas for their chosen claim.

While students worked within their assigned pairs or small groups, I circulated the room, listening to each group explore a range of topics collaboratively. I offered assistance when I noticed that students' conversations seemed to dwindle or break down, or if students appeared lost or confused. Since students worked simultaneously in various locations of the classroom, I could not listen to all of their conversations; however, by using video footage of various students at different points during the improv exercises, I was able to capture some of their conversations. Below, I include a transcript of the "Yes, and" exercise performed by two students in my study, Kim and Margaret. Kim began the exercise with a statement that reflected her central topic, which addressed increased wages and improved working conditions for employees at a fast food restaurant chain. Kim explained that she works at this fast food restaurant in her hometown during the summer and intersession when she is away from the university.[27] This exchange illustrates each student's contributions in a new line of dialogue:

> Kim: Salaries should be increased for workers who demonstrate high work ethic and morale.
> Margaret: Yes, and that will create more of an incentive to work harder in sch . . . in your job.
> Kim: Yes, and this will lead to a higher productive rate from the company.
> Margaret: Yes, and this will lead to happier, um, customers.
> Kim: Yes, and customer satisfaction is half of the profit.
> Margaret: Yes, and more profit will lead to happier stockholders.
> Kim: Yes, and happier stockholders will lead to more business from those stockholders.
> Margaret: Yes, and more business from the stockholders will lead to more money going into the company.
> Kim: Yes, and more money means more money for the employees.
> Margaret: Yes, and this means a greater, um, diversity in the programs the company can offer.

---

[27] In transcribing students' oral responses, I have tried to capture their voices as accurately as possible and therefore include aspects of their speech patterns such as pauses and nondescript verbal utterances.

Kim: Yes, and diversity will allow the company to expand in a beneficial way.
Margaret: Yes, and this will lead to a more positive environment for the, ah, employees.
Kim: Yes, and this will lead to greater employee satisfaction.
Margaret: Yes, and happier employees means happier work environments.
Kim: Yes, and this will lead to an increase in morale overall.

During this exchange, Kim and Margaret collaboratively explored aspects of Kim's original claim about the importance of compensating employees for their "high work ethic and morale." Together they generated a list of possible sub-topics and related ideas from the perspectives of employees as well as business owners, which encompass worker productivity, profits, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and increased business. With the help of her partner Kim discovered a range of potential benefits and reasons for improving working conditions, several of which appeared in the content of her letter.

This type of collective information-gathering is at the heart of the "Yes, and" exercise. By participating in a collaborative form of brainstorming, students come to experience invention as communal, socially-constructed, and context-driven. Here, invention relies on the contributions of other people, and taps into a collective knowledge base, built from the experiences and observations players have gathered from the world around them by interacting in various communities and environments. Put another way, students engage in processes of invention that are rhetorical, and make decisions about their writing based on the information they receive from audiences both in and outside of the classroom, including their peers and the target audience of their writing assignment, who, to a certain extent, might share in the community-based knowledge being explored in the exercise. Students make these decisions while inventing with the intention of influencing both audiences.

As shown above, students began the "Yes, and" exercise with a statement that reflected their stance on a chosen topic. Believing and accepting this statement often posed little difficulty

for students, especially if their original claim supported the central argument of their persuasive

letters. Once students completed the exercise using affirming statements, I set out to challenge

their limits of acceptance. I asked them to revise slightly their written sentences to capture an

opposing view, changing only a few words so that the major theme of their claim remained the

same. Once students constructed these revised statements, I asked them to use it to perform the

"Yes, and" exercise, accepting the position it reflected as best as they could. While I was not

able to capture this conversation between Kim and Margaret on video since I did not record

every student interaction, I provide here my best estimation of Kim's revised sentence.[28] This

estimation is derived from the changes I noticed in her draft as well as the transcript of her

previous dialogue with Margaret: "Salaries should *not* be increased for workers who

demonstrate high work ethic and morale." Using this statement, Kim and Margaret would now

explore reasons why increased salaries might not be a desired approach to boosting "high work

ethic and morale." They would be encouraged to think from the perspective of employers who

might be looking for other ways to reward employees without providing financial incentive, such

as improved benefits, including better hours and vacation time. By actually performing an

opposing view, students invent potential reasons and arguments that might appear as

counterarguments in their writing. One of the objectives of the exercise is to immerse students in

different perspectives and provide an alternative lens through which to view their topic.[29]

Students focus on exploring how and/or why an audience might disagree with their original

---

[28] In future iterations of this study, I would like to record, either through video or audio technologies, students' conversations of the "Yes, and" exercise in each of its stages so that I might better capture an actual transcript of their improvised dialogue.

[29] Spending time working with only two statements (one pro and one con) may have the adverse effect of reinforcing the idea that issues have only two sides. My intention was to focus students' attention on at least one opposing view that may have an impact on their writing. In the future, I plan to identify multiple perspectives with students and ask them to perform the "Yes, and" exercise with a range of views.

premise. Having them think *and perform* an opposing view presents an experience quite different from simply asking them to consider an alternative perspective. I intended this exercise to help students discover and think through the kinds of material that might potentially increase the persuasiveness of their letters by anticipating concerns their target audience and others might raise.

Another major objective of the exercise is to help students practice thinking and generating ideas spontaneously in a group setting. To provide this practice, I encouraged students to explore a range of ideas through speaking and listening, the primary modes of communicating in the exercise, without immediately recording, sorting, or prioritizing these ideas. I advised them to wait until the exercise was over to create a written record of as many ideas, reasons, arguments, and/or counterarguments as they remembered without attempting to create a transcript of their conversation with others. This practice potentially shows students that processes of invention are equally important to their resulting products. It also makes them more aware of a key challenge facing every writer: when inventing, whether by alternative or conventional means, writers must decide which ideas to explore and pursue further, since not every idea is equally effective and relevant given a writer's purpose and rhetorical situation.

iii. Improv Exercise #3: "Rewind"

The next improv exercise I adapted to help students invent material for their letters is an exercise called "Rewind." In this exercise, two improv players usually engage in a conversation about a specific topic, while a third player, standing off-stage, interrupts the dialogue at specific moments by shouting the word "Rewind." When this interruption happens, the last player to speak must offer a different response by repeating her last statement, but with a different ending. This exercise encourages players to offer alternative responses quickly that inject new ideas into

152

a scene and potentially move it in a new direction. Similar to most improv exercises, this new information is spontaneously created, leaving the players within the scene unsure about what action will occur next. Here is an example of how the exercise might be used in an improv performance:

> Player #1: Mom, I'm so excited my birthday is finally here!
> Player #2: [*Hands Player #1 an imaginary box.*] Me too! Why don't you go ahead and open your present?
> Player #1: [*Opens imaginary box.*] Oh wow! Thank you for buying me this lovely **scarf.**
> Player #3: [*Off-stage*] Rewind.
> Player #1: [*Opens imaginary box.*] Thank you for buying me this lovely **sweater.**
> Player #3: [*Off-stage*] Rewind.
> Player #1: [*Opens imaginary box.*] Thank you for buying me this lovely **treehouse.**

Once Player #3 has finished saying "Rewind," the scene continues and Player #1's last response becomes integrated into the drama of the scene. This response influences the next line of dialogue, which, in the above example, would address the gift of a treehouse and how it could possibly fit inside a gift box.[30] The exercise works as if Player #3 is using a television remote control to rewind the players' dialogue at certain moments in the scene to elicit new choices and ideas by compelling players to invent a multitude of responses on the spot.[31]

In the context of my study, I adapted "Rewind" so that it focused students' attention on making different choices about the content and structure of their persuasive letters. Specifically,

---

[30] Player #3 can prompt either Player #1 or #2 to inject new information into the scene through the same verbal structure.

[31] These new responses can, but are not required, to fit the content of the scene. Since players are pressed for time when responding, they typically contribute something wild or highly unusual by their third or fourth response to Player #3 stating "Rewind." This last reaction tends to elevate the unusual qualities of the scene by forcing players to think outside conventional responses. For example, instead of a treehouse, Player #1 may have said an elephant, and then the scene would have progressed with a mother giving her daughter an elephant wrapped up in a gift box for her birthday.

I designed the exercise to prompt students to think about what made them interested in their topic and how they might approach their introductions and conclusions differently. In place of a conventional peer review session, the exercise provided students with a method of responding to each other's letter drafts. I adapted this approach from Adar Cohen's article, "From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writers." In his article, Cohen introduces readers to an approach he calls "improv-tutoring," whereby tutors in a writing center incorporate improv exercises to help tutees explore ideas related to their writing and boost their confidence in those ideas. Drawing upon Viola Spolin's techniques and principles, Cohen describes how exercises like "Word Ball," "Sound Ball," and "Gibberish Ball" not only engage tutees in the "free association" and "unrestrained generation of ideas," but also helps reduce feelings of anxiety about writing (7). By asking tutees to produce words or "non-sensical noises in a discursive, academic context," Cohen argues, students quickly learn that they have entered a space that resists judgment and welcomes ideas of all kinds—nothing is too far afield for the purposes of the exercises or their initial draft (7).

In the case of the "Rewind" exercise specifically, Cohen adapts it so that tutors ask tutees questions about their writing and then use a bell to signal when it's time for the tutee to give another response, which might include different ways of developing body paragraphs (6).[32] To illustrate how this exercise might work, Cohen includes a simulated conversation with a tutee at the start of his article. He begins by asking the student how she might develop a specific paragraph in an unnamed piece of writing, which appears to be about teenagers and their parents. After the student offers an initial suggestion, Cohen interrupts the conversation with a bell,

---

[32] In my experience, I've seen variations of this exercise, although the basic premise and structure remain the same. While Cohen labels it "Actually" in his article, I've seen it called "Different Choice" by other improv players. I've also participated in variations of this exercise in rehearsal and in a live performance.

instead of the word "Rewind," and the student gives an alternative answer. Cohen repeats this process with several other questions such as "What else?" and "Is that true?" to prompt the student to produce new responses each time (6). After a few, quick exchanges, the tutee is able to identify a possible subtopic that taps into a personal experience about moving out before the age of 18. She explains that she wants "to prove that teenagers can make it on their own" (6). Readers of Cohen's article can glean from this interaction that the tutee is able to move from discussing her topic in very general terms to locating a specific personal experience that helps crystalize the argument she wants to make. Cohen's approach in this example and his article overall opens a space for writing teachers looking to incorporate these types of methods into their classrooms, especially methods that foster peer relationships among students and cultivate collective idea generation while minimizing the pressure to "get it right" when it comes to writing.

Adapting Cohen's technique, I advised students to work in pairs and to use the "Rewind" exercise to generate ideas for their letter drafts. Instead of using a bell, however, students responded by using the word "Rewind" and a series of questions with sentence starters to help focus their attention on particular aspects of each other's drafts. The questions and sentence starters I designed directed students' attention to their personal connections to the topic, reasons for their argument, and ways of introducing and concluding their letters.[33] For example, students asked each other, "Why are you interested in this topic?," "How else might you start or end your letter?" and "How else might you use this research source?" After their partner gave an answer, students replied with "Rewind" to elicit an alternative response. I adapted this exercise specifically to motivate students to not only speak extemporaneously about their topic, but to do

---

[33] For a full description of the questions and sentence starters used in this exercise, see the full handout in the Appendix.

so in a focused way. The structure of my adaptation is admittedly more scripted than what

improv actors typically do, but it helped students more easily fulfill the purposes of the exercise.

Students took turns acting as responders and questioners within this framework to address each

other's drafts. I include below a transcript of the "Rewind" exercise as performed by two

students, Matt and Jin. In the section of video I recorded, Matt and Jin are exploring Jin's letter

draft, which addresses his argument of reducing noise pollution in his neighborhood in Queens,

New York. Jin decided to focus his letter on a nearby subway line that he believes is

contributing to the noise pollution. Specifically in this portion of "Rewind," he is searching for

ways to introduce his letter so that his audience, the President of the Metropolitan Transportation

Authority (MTA), might be persuaded to take action. Matt plays the role of questioner while Jin

responds each time with a different answer:

> Matt: How else would you start your letter?
> Jin: I could start my letter by, um, addressing the issue first.
> Matt: Rewind.
> Jin: I could start my letter by, um, giving a person's interview, like ah,
> someone's, like a quote from someone that I've interviewed.
> Matt: Rewind.
> Jin: I could start my letter by, um, by addressing the health issues that we have in
> our community.

With each response Jin gives, he invents a new way of introducing his letter that he might use in

the revision of his draft. The exercise provides him with a method of discovering alternative

formats, each arguably more focused than the next. He begins by suggesting that he could

introduce his letter simply by "addressing the issue [of noise pollution] first." He then follows

this direct approach with the idea of opening with a quote from someone he has interviewed

about the issue, possibly someone currently living with the problem of noise pollution. This

second approach would provide Jin with the opportunity to weave into his letter the voice of

someone in the community, a perspective that may help heighten his letter's persuasive appeal.

Finally, Jin proposes another introduction to this letter that conveys the issue of noise pollution

in very specific terms, mainly health-related factors affecting his local community. Each time

Jin offers a response, he potentially finds different ways of grabbing his reader's attention and

highlighting the importance of the problem. After starting out by casting a wide net, he narrows

his attention to include the actual people involved with noise pollution and certain problems

related to the issue. This conceptual adjustment potentially yields more rhetorically-savvy

choices that could strengthen the argumentative weight of Jin's letter.[34] The possibilities that

emerged highlight the purpose of the "Rewind" exercise. It was intended to provide students

with an opportunity to develop new insights into their topics and drafts, including the structure

and content of their letters.

III. Comparative Analysis of Students' Letter Drafts: Overall Results

By incorporating these improv exercises into my writing instruction, I hoped to engage

students in collaborative invention strategies that would help them generate new material for

their letter-writing assignment and help them explore multiple perspectives to enhance the

persuasiveness of their letters. Studying students' before and after drafts provided key insights

into the kinds of new material students invented, how this new material affected the shape and

content of their letters, and the extent to which students addressed alternative viewpoints in their

writing. To organize the data, I identified two major categories of revisions that I outline in the

tables below: changes to the structure of students' revised letters and changes to the content of

---

[34] It is important to note that although Jin made some significant discoveries during the exercise, he did not change his introduction from his first draft to the next. There are too many factors that may have influenced his decision to adequately discuss them here; however, one factor may have been that Jin was not convinced his introduction needed revision in the first place. In both versions I read, he started his letter by directly introducing himself and where he lives.

their revised letters. In these tables, I identify the different types of revisions I included within

each category and the number of students out of 15 that demonstrated each type of revision in

their writing.[35] Students often exhibited more than one type of revision in their second drafts.

Category #1 of Revisions: Noted Changes to the Structure of Students' Revised Letters	
Structural Changes (paragraphs include students' introductions, conclusions, and body paragraphs)	**Number of Students out of 15**
Addition of new paragraphs	6
Deletion of existing paragraphs	2
Shortening of existing paragraphs (by 1 or more sentences)	2
Lengthening of existing paragraphs (by 1 or more sentences)	14
Combining of existing paragraphs	1
Dividing or splitting up of existing paragraphs into 2 or more paragraphs	1
Changes in the overall order of existing paragraphs (reordering paragraphs; switching the placement of paragraphs)	4
No changes in the overall order of existing paragraphs (no structural changes to letters by adding, deleting, or switching entire paragraphs)	9

Category #2 of Revisions: Noted Changes to the Content of Students' Revised Letters	
Content Changes	**Number of Students out of 15**
Addition of new arguments	12
Addition of new counterarguments	6

---

[35] Of the 16 students that volunteered for my study, 15 produced before and after drafts. One student did not produce a first draft before completing the exercises; however, I did interview him about his experiences as a subject in the study.

Category #2 of Revisions: Noted Changes to the Content of Students' Revised Letters	
Content Changes	**Number of Students out of 15**
Addition of new research from outside sources, including academic sources or news sources	2
Addition of new reasons, examples, and/or rationales to support new arguments or counterarguments	13
Addition of any new material to supporting existing arguments, counterarguments, reasons, examples, and/or rationales	10
Deletion of any existing material (more than 1 sentence)	3
No additions or deletions of content (no changes to content between drafts)	1

By coding students' revisions in this way, I attempted to pinpoint specific rhetorical decisions they made between their first and revised drafts, and how these decisions might reflect their involvement with improv as a method of invention. Carefully analyzing students' revisions allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how these exercises might have influenced the choices they made after being exposed to collaborative methods of brainstorming that are potentially unlike anything students have experienced before.

Based on this data, one striking finding is that overall 14 out of 15, or 93% of students, all wrote longer revised letters after participating in the improv exercises.[36] Several students used many different approaches to extend their letters; however, the most common method was by lengthening existing paragraphs, which a total of 14 students chose to do. The second most

---

[36] Based on this total, it is important to note that one student lengthened his letter only by adding a heading without making any other changes, while another student who actually extended the length of some of his paragraphs wrote a shorter revised letter because he removed information from other paragraphs. I think it is worth noting that the first student extended his letter by adding only a heading because it suggests that the student at least noted the features of the business letter genre and its importance to meeting the needs of his rhetorical situation. For further details about changes in the length (word count) of students' before and after drafts, please see the Appendix.

common method included adding new paragraphs, which 40% of students accomplished. Less than half decided to delete, shorten, combine, or split up their existing paragraphs. In fact, only 4 students actually changed the order of their existing paragraphs in their revision. A majority of students decided to add on to their draft rather than move or delete material they had composed originally.

While most students maintained the structure of their original letters, many made revisions that reveal new developments in their thinking about their topic and central argument. Of the 14 students that lengthened their existing paragraphs, 13 added new material, including new examples, reasons, and rationales to expand their existing arguments, while 12 added entirely new arguments to their letters. In one case, a student writing to her Congressman about the need for trash removal in her neighborhood decided to introduce a new argument about how this problem presents health risks to animals as well as residents. By adding a new paragraph into her letter, she introduces the argument by stating that "our beloved pets could be eating something that can upset their stomachs or even worse, poison them." Her use of the phrase "our beloved pets" in her addition shrinks the emotional distance with her reader and directly involves this audience in the protection of animals through waste removal. Other students in the study added new arguments that appealed more directly to their audiences, including arguments related to financial concerns, which I address in later sections of this chapter.

The addition of new information, either in the form of new or newly developed material, suggests that the context of using improvisational acting may have helped students generate ideas and evidence to introduce new claims into their letters as well as support existing ones that appeared in their first drafts. I designed the improv exercises specifically as invention heuristics to help students accumulate ideas while focusing their attention on multiple sides of their

argument. The "Yes, and" exercise especially was intended to help students accept and believe perspectives and experiences different from their own in order to expand their thinking and anticipate readers' concerns. As a way of measuring this expansion, I paid close attention to the number of students that included counterarguments in their revised drafts. Surprisingly, less than half, 6 out of 15 students, addressed opposing views in their letters. While this number is lower than I originally anticipated, I found that of these 6 students, 4 introduced counterarguments into their letters for the first time in their second letters. This finding suggests that even though only a handful of students actually included counterarguments, some were perhaps more aware of the persuasive appeal of this kind of material and were better able to incorporate it into their letters as a result of improvisation. The collaborative environment and focus on audience during the improvisation may have helped these four students discover insights into their arguments they might not have otherwise come across and develop ways of integrating them into their writing.

IV. Student Letters[37]

While studying the new material students introduced into their revised letters, I noticed that in some cases, students' letters reflected a greater awareness of audience. Students not only added information that helped increase the overall persuasiveness of their letters but also appealed more specifically to the concerns of their chosen readers. Many of the new claims they invented revealed a shift in their thinking along with new intellectual connections. Students appeared to widen their focus from their original drafts to their revised versions, such that their audiences' experiences and motivations played a larger role in their letters' persuasiveness. The first set of student letters I analyze below come from two students that lengthened their letters by both expanding existing body paragraphs and adding new ones that introduced new arguments,

---

[37] To maintain anonymity, the names of all students, their hometowns, and the audiences to which they wrote have been changed or removed.

reasons, and examples to support their claims. While I have chosen to highlight these letters and others in my analysis, they are still representative of the types of changes most students made to their revised letters. As I mention above, almost every student included new material in their second letters in some form, including additional arguments, counterarguments, and supporting examples. I focus here on the texts of several students whose revisions I argue exhibited a heightened sense of audience in terms of the information they chose to include, how they used it, and how they organized it. In providing this analysis, I suggest that the context of applying improvisational acting to a writing classroom, which emphasizes collaborative and social forms of invention, potentially contributed to students' increased awareness of audience.

Sarah's Letter

In response to the letter-writing assignment, one student, Sarah, decided to concentrate on the lack of town-wide and school-wide events in her suburban neighborhood, events she felt were necessary to promote community involvement and connections between local residents, schools, and businesses. In an effort to address this perceived problem, Sarah identified her town supervisor, John Anderson, as the primary stakeholder and audience of her letter, someone she recognized as attentive to the needs and concerns of residents, and with the authority and legislative power to implement change. Specifically, in her revision, Sarah included relevant information about Anderson's past experiences that relate to the topic of her letter. This information, which arguably helps bolster her argument, did not appear in the first draft of her letter, which suggests that this increase in audience awareness may have resulted from using improvisation as a method of invention. Improvisation, with its attention to collaborative idea generation and multiple viewpoints, may have motivated Sarah to envision her topic from her audience's perspective, and provided her with a tool for writing.

162

While Sarah includes personal experiences living in her hometown of Glendale in her original letter, she gives it greater weight in her revised letter to draw in her audience. More importantly, she hones in on a specific detail of Anderson's past to generate shared concern and enlist his help in fostering stronger community involvement in her hometown. This rhetorical move potentially adds a new dimension to Sarah's project and enhances her letter's pathetic and logical appeals. It changes the structure of a section of her letter, in which she divides an original body paragraph into two and adds new information to both. This new information serves to highlight the importance of a valuable and community-building event that Sarah feels boosts connection and participation among residents: homecoming. To drive home this point, Sarah not only compares her experiences of homecoming in high school to her new institution, Stony Brook University, but also underscores Anderson's possible experience of homecoming, given his position as a former football player at Yale University. The new information in Sarah's body paragraph is underlined:

Body Paragraph in Draft:	New Body Paragraphs in Revised Letter:
I am an everyday citizen who has lived in Farmingville for 17 years. I currently reside in Stony Brook University and have experienced a new side of life by joining the Spirit of Stony Brook marching band. The marching band brought a sense of community to my life, the first time I had gained such a thing. Stony Brook University also contributed to this with its 24,000 students and 13,000 staff and faculty members certainly creates a large community to work with. 'Wolf Stock', a Stony Brook homecoming tradition brought many people together. Sachem homecoming was never a week-long event for the community. It could barely be called an event for the community. It was more for students who had an interest in football or the homecoming court.	I am an everyday citizen who has lived in Glendale for 17 years. To be quite frank, I have very few memories about living in Glendale and enjoying it. The only event I can remember where people were actually together as a community was the Memorial Day parade held on the last Monday of May each year. As a member of the Sachem band in middle school, I was lucky enough to participate in the parade. The approximately mile long walk had around 500 people, at most, following or watching the parade, while another 500 actually participated. Where were the other 9,000 people? Not present. Not home. Not interested. It is upsetting living in such a town, knowing that people are not interested in where they live. Then what's the point of living there to begin with?

I currently reside in Stony Brook University and have experienced a new side of life by joining the Spirit of Stony Brook marching band. The marching band brought a sense of community to my life, the first time I had gained such a thing. Stony Brook University also contributed to this with its 24,000 students and 13,000 staff and faculty members, which certainly create a large community to work with. 'Wolf Stock', a Stony Brook homecoming tradition brought many people together. Sachem homecoming was never a week-long event for the community. It could barely be called an event for the community. It was more for students who had an interest in football or the homecoming court. As a former football player of a large, well known school, Yale University, I believe it is safe to assume that homecoming was an important part of your college career. Homecoming is a time where everyone gathers at the football game to cheer on their home team, hoping that they will win and prove to the school's alumni and current students what makes up the school. Besides the football game, other events bring together the students, staff, and parents of the school. By making Sachem homecoming a community-wide event, we can increase the proximity of the townspeople. |

These revisions illustrate Sarah's heightened awareness of her audience and the rhetorical power of incorporating personal experience. By first drawing upon past events, Sarah reminds

164

Anderson of her insider status as a town resident and student. She then uses this information to amplify the comparison she makes between her town and Stony Brook University, which also appears in her earlier draft. Although she uses a misplaced modifier in her revision, Sarah directly references Anderson's background as a college football player at Yale with the intention of attaching his experiences of homecoming with her thoughts, associations, and perceptions of the event. Sarah's revision suggests that she hopes Anderson will not only register similar feelings of excitement and belonging, but also share in the common belief that homecoming is a time to showcase a school's pride and build community ties. Put another way, her method of gaining Anderson's investment is to create an explicit link between his past and her present circumstances, mapping his relevant college experience onto her own. This approach provides an entry point into connecting Anderson to the issue on a more personal level, in addition to his public obligation as Town Supervisor. As a result, Sarah's writing demonstrates a growing awareness of her audience's role in this rhetorical situation, and a desire to tap into common beliefs, expectations, and values to achieve her rhetorical purpose. Sarah identifies what she sees as their joint commitment to improving community life in Glendale as a way of grabbing and sustaining her audience's attention.

This observation in Sarah's revised writing calls attention to the potential effects of using methods of invention from improv in the teaching of writing. It also highlights the impact of the environment surrounding these methods in helping students produce new material for writing. More specifically, Sarah's direct reference to her audience's personal experience as a persuasive appeal speaks to an aspect of the "Rewind" exercise, which may be responsible in part for her rhetorical decision. The "Rewind" exercise in particular offered students the opportunity to explore their personal interest in the topic as an important way of developing their argument.

When students were asked "Why are you interested in this topic?" and their partner responded with "Rewind," they were motivated to invent several reasons to explain their interest. As a mode of discovery, the exercise was intended to help students produce additional material about what they wanted to say about their topic and why it personally mattered. The fact that I asked students to explore personal interest issues may have influenced their decision-making, and encouraged greater investment and attention to composing rhetorically effective letters. However, the structure and focus of the improv exercises, particularly "Rewind," may have encouraged students to articulate more fully their reasons for this personal interest and to see it as a lens through which to view their argument. In Sarah's case, exploring the topic of community, and more specifically homecoming, through the lens of personal experience may have triggered her thinking to imagine the issue from another's point of view. As a result, Sarah investigated not only her personal ties to the problem, but her audience's as well, motivating her to dive into his past experiences, which were absent from her first draft. Through this approach, Sarah attempts to establish a more direct link between Anderson's circumstances and the problem she wishes to solve. By articulating her own reasons for being interested, Sarah may have discovered similar reasons why Anderson would be too, which led her to highlight these reasons in her writing.

This widening of perspective and flexibility in thinking not only deepens Sarah's understanding of the issue, but advances an audience-oriented framework that is supported by the context of improvisational acting. As Sarah interacts with her partner and improvises, she invents an array of responses and communicates with a live audience, other than the teacher, who listens and reacts to the suggestions she offers. These suggestions, in turn, motivate alternative courses of action that might determine the structure and content of her letter when she revises her

166

writing. Moreover, these suggestions represent socially-embedded responses shaped by two

audiences, her partner and the audience of her writing, both of whom influence Sarah's decision-

making. This collaborative environment promotes a form of invention that is highly inflected by

audience and context. Sarah and other students alike potentially realize the social aspects of

writing and that the choices they make shape and are shaped by systems of communication

beyond her individual perspective, which perhaps explains Sarah's attention to Anderson's

perspective and his past experiences. With this attention on audience, Sarah attempts to

communicate a personal as well as shared concern, while aligning her values and goals about

community with her audience's commitment and responsibilities. She suggests that all members

of the community have a stake in resolving the problem.

Another possible factor in Sarah's revisions may have been her introduction to the

underlying principles of the "Yes, and" exercise. Overall the processes of invention in

improvisation encourage players to draw from personal experience and observations about the

outside world and use this material to "accept" and "add to" the experiences of others. These

processes also cultivate a particular mindset that ascribes value to new ideas. In Sarah's case,

there exists possible evidence of this mindset influencing her revisions. She accepts the

importance of her own personal experiences while adding Anderson's to strengthen her

argument. Put another way, she responds to the rhetorical situation with the understanding that,

"*Yes*, I experience community this way *and* so does Anderson through similar experiences of

homecoming." She establishes a premise by recognizing their similar school experiences and

then follows through by drawing the conclusion that her audience will likely care about the

problem in the same way she does. Sarah's content and organization demonstrate a level of

confidence and acceptance in leading with her personal experience and foregrounding it, rather

than privileging Anderson's background to substantiate her claims about community. She chooses to use his experience to add to her own instead of replacing it, thereby positioning it as evidence to support her reasons.

As both an exercise and a mind frame, "Yes, and" gives students an opportunity to generate ideas, but also to embrace them from a standpoint of acceptance. In "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy," Fishman and Lunsford et al. describe this premise of "accepting all offers" in improvisation as an "ethic of acceptance," which encourages student writers to trust their ideas and move forward. In their work with student writer and co-author Beth McGregor, Fishman and Lunsford observe this ethic developing from McGregor's experience as an actor and her use of it in writing situations to minimize the effects of "writer's block by granting herself permission to keep going" (243). Where McGregor learned to "trust and accept herself enough to move on," Sarah trusted the connection she invented between her and Anderson's experiences, and trusted its value enough to use it in her letter (243). The "Yes, and" exercise promotes this "ethic of acceptance" by specifically instructing students to invent ideas without stopping, judging, or censuring them; students are encouraged to trust their ideas and the suggestions of their partner.

While performing improvisation may have helped Sarah articulate and draw connections between her and her audience's experiences, it is possible that other elements may have influenced her thinking. Since my clinical study did not include a formal control group, any number of factors may have affected students' decision-making as they revised their drafts. For example, Sarah had the experience of speaking and listening to others comment and read her letter, which may have led to changes in the way she structured and developed her writing. The additional fact that Sarah and other students grew a few months in age by the time the study

ended may have also played a role in their development as writers. Nevertheless, there is a strong possibility that using improvisation for invention encouraged new ways of thinking and arguably helped students make new discoveries about how they conceptualized and interpreted ideas. Sarah's revised writing reveals traces of an increased sense of audience awareness, which perhaps resulted from her becoming more attuned to her audience's expectations. Working with improv as an invention strategy and model holds the potential of helping students further their purposes for writing while raising their rhetorical knowledge.

V. Nicole's Letter

For this same assignment, another student, Nicole, decided to write a letter to her town mayor about reducing the pollution of nearby beaches and the local Long Island Sound. Similar to Sarah, Nicole exhibited signs in her writing that improvisation may have influenced changes between her drafts. While Nicole made several revisions to her letter, including switching the order of her first two paragraphs, I focus here on her body paragraphs to illustrate connections to the "Yes, and" exercise in particular. The sections I highlight include information that did not appear in Nicole's first draft, but appeared in her revised letter. By adding new material, Nicole expanded upon existing ideas while introducing new ones that provided information to support her claims and increase the persuasive appeal of her letter. Nicole also drew connections between old and new ideas to help her audience understand some of the cause-and-effect relationships she perceived surrounding the issue of pollution, which her revised letter highlights.

In her first draft, Nicole included a bulleted list of the effects of pollution on Long Island Sound and a nearby beach. During revision, she transformed this list into three new body

paragraphs, the first of which is included in the table below alongside the original list.[38] A major driving force behind Nicole's argument was establishing a personal connection between residents, as well as her direct audience, and the problem, which she references in the sentence that introduces her list:

Body Paragraph in Draft:	First New Body Paragraph in Revised Letter:
To have this very personal affect, I have compiled a list of negative changes that may potentially occur if the levels of pollution rise in the Long Island Sound: · Not aesthetically pleasing [1] · Decrease the amount of victors [sic] to the area (economic impact) [2] · Local business will suffer [3] · Fishing/clamming will decrease as a result of poor water quality [4] · Reducing the value of each individual home, especially those located near or on the beach [5] · Danger to walk on the beach barefoot and lastly (most importantly) [6] · Risk of animals becoming extinct in our location (esp. horseshoe crab) [7] · Damaging the environment in unimaginable way [8]	There are several reasons as to why we need to see a change in the way we take care of our environment including economic, safety and environmental issues. One of the[m] being that the town will become less aesthetically pleasing. Looking at our beaches will eventually become an eye sore to everyone in the town and those who visit the town. I can see this as having a negative impact on the local economy because when <u>the amount of visitors to the town decreases (as a result of the decrease in aesthetic value), businesses and town parks and beaches will suffer</u>. **[Items #1-3]** <u>Fewer people will be willing to spend their money on parking passes to go to beaches that are not on par with the high standards that many hold these beaches to. Fewer visitors will also frequent local restaurants</u>, as they will be finding other towns that have cleaner beaches will restaurants that are arguably just as nice. **[Item #3]** The area as a whole will eventually become less desirable and <u>the value of each home, especially those located on or near the beach will decrease. People will lose a significant amount of money that they may have invested in to their homes over the past years.</u> **[Item #5]**

---

[38] I have numbered the items in Nicole's original list to better identify how she combines them in her revised letter. I have also underlined new material in her revised body paragraph that highlights the introduction of new ideas and the expansion of existing ideas into her letter.

170

In the first new body paragraph that emerged from this list, Nicole combines items #1-3 and #5, and focuses explicitly on how these ideas are interconnected and stem from environmental issues regarding beach pollution. In connecting these ideas, Nicole helps her audience, the town mayor, understand a web of interdependent and relevant issues that influence and are influenced by each other, rather than an isolated checklist of effects, which appeared in her original. She establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between the declining aesthetic value of the town and beaches and the financial consequences the community will experience, which she highlights by focusing on local businesses. She pays specific attention to restaurants that will likely see a decline in profit due to the drop in visitors to the area as well as resident homeowners who will see a loss in property value. Nicole reasons that these businesses and homeowners, representatives of the community at large, lose out to surrounding areas that offer cleaner beaches and arguably better places to live. These connections reflect certain intellectual processes central to the "Yes, and" exercise, including processes of adding, building, and elaborating upon information, which prompted students to verbalize mental associations they were making between ideas. The "and" part of the exercise specifically helps stimulate students' thinking about what information becomes associated with certain ideas, arguments, examples, concepts, and claims while raising questions about how these ideas are related: If this happens, then what else is possible? The type of thinking this exercise promotes may have enhanced Nicole's ability to verbalize and visibly recognize the associations she envisioned between specific ideas, leading to a greater understanding of certain cause-and-relationships she wished to emphasize in her writing.

At the same time Nicole established these causal links, she also engaged in the process of adding new ideas and new arguments in her letter to help build her case. For example, in her

revised paragraph, she adds on the idea that in addition to beaches, town parks will also experience adverse effects, and that fewer visitors to the area will lead to the buying of fewer parking passes, and thus weaken the town's local economy. Here, Nicole not only elaborates on the idea that pollution will have an "economic impact," which she expresses in item #2 of her original list, but provides additional evidence as to how this impact will be felt on a local scale. As compared with her first draft, the writing of her revised letter demonstrates a greater level of depth and complexity. Nicole appears to more fully consider the multiple and far-reaching effects of beach pollution and takes her reader through several layers of consequences that provide a more informed look at the problem she identifies. She also addresses concerns that would be especially appealing to the town mayor's financial interests.

In the last sentence of her revised paragraph, Nicole adds new information that develops this multifaceted view of pollution and supports her claim that it will lead to lost property value for resident homeowners (item #5). She states that, "The area as a whole will eventually become less desirable and the value of each home, especially those located on or near the beach will decrease. People will lose a significant amount of money that they may have invested in to their homes over the past years" (emphasis added). By adding this information, Nicole emphasizes the negative effects of pollution and frames the idea of lost property value in terms of monetary amounts, which adds weight to this economic effect and emphasizes that any added value contributed by homeowners over time, either through home renovations or repairs, will likely be lost as well. In making this addition, Nicole suggests that this loss in property value will be detrimental to residents in the long run if the problem of pollution is not addressed. She also implies an indirect effect that would be of great interest to her audience: the mayor's loss of

support from his constituency if residents and business owners face continued challenges without relief from legislators.

Nicole's interview with me, which took place after the improv exercises and the role-play and after she wrote both versions of her letter, also sheds light on what potentially motivated her content and structural revisions. In response to a question about "Yes and," she explains how the exercise influenced her choices about what to include in her revised letter and ways of organizing it:

> Nicole: Well, I started out with like, um, not an introduction paragraph, but it was kind of like laying out what I was going to talk about, um, and I didn't follow that entirely in my [letter] so I just changed it around and then added more things that could have supported it better.
> Lauren: Do you remember any of those specific things?
> Nicole: Not really no.
> Lauren: But you . . . remember reordering things . . . "Yes, and" helped make you think about those changes?
> Nicole: It helped me like add more points. Like I had to split up certain paragraphs and then add more.

Though Nicole did not remember the specific changes she made to her letter, she identifies the potential effects of the exercise on her ability to produce and organize new material when she explains that, "It helped me like add more points."[39] Throughout her revised letter, Nicole continued to add new ideas and expand upon existing ones as a way of providing additional evidence to support her argument that also proved to be audience-focused. In spite of Nicole's difficulty in articulating exactly how the exercise helped her expand her thoughts, the exercise

---

[39] As I mention above, the timeline for the interviews was delayed by approximately 2-3 weeks due to Hurricane Sandy in the fall of 2012. I met with students later than expected due to class cancellations and other extenuating circumstances as a result of the hurricane. While students remembered much in their interviews about their experiences using improvisation, they often attributed their inability to recall more specific details to this gap in time.

may have allowed her to develop an awareness of the interconnected nature of some real-life

consequences to pollution. [40] She also learned ways of framing these consequences to attract the

attention of an audience whose job it is to support the well-being of local citizens.

VI. Changes to the Conclusions of Students' Letters

Just as Sarah and Nicole made significant revisions to their body paragraphs that reflect

greater audience awareness, several other students made significant revisions to their letter

conclusions that reveal a similar awareness. I have chosen to highlight these students' revisions

because a comparative analysis of their texts suggests a shift in the approach they used from one

draft to the next. This shift reveals a more receptive and audience-conscious stance in their

revised letters as compared to the stance they established in the first letters they produced for

class. Three male students in particular, whom I discuss below, produced revised conclusions

that were more tailored to their audiences' perspectives, and were arguably more persuasive than

their original letters as a result.[41] Specifically, these students made changes in word choice,

phrasing, and the kinds of evidence they used to develop a more engaging tone in their writing

that, in some cases, moved them away from making accusations to elicit reader support by using

a more positive attitude.

Overall, these students' texts exhibited an openness to other perspectives and ideas that is

reflected in the principles and structures of improvisation. The students I discuss below

appeared able to not only demonstrate an awareness of other perspectives, but act upon this

---

[40] In future research, I would ask students to bring a copy of their letters to the interview to help them remember their choices of revision and why they made these choices. I would also ask students to reread their drafts before the interviews to help them remember more specific information about the revisions they made to their letters. I would like to thank Dr. Ken Lindblom for suggesting this additional approach.

[41] I chose to study the five students in this chapter because of the types of revisions they made in their letters. Although gender was not a direct factor in this decision or in the scope of this project, it represents an area of study for further research.

rhetorical knowledge by making different writing choices in their revisions. These changes

suggest that working with improv techniques as invention strategies potentially helped students

imagine newer possibilities for persuading their chosen audiences to take action, and perhaps

encouraged them to think about their topics from the stance of someone in a position of greater

power and authority and to articulate this thinking through different methods of persuasion in

their writing.

VII. Brian's Letter Conclusion

One of the students in my study, Brian, decided to write his letter to the town supervisor

of his neighborhood, requesting new safety measures that would help protect pedestrians from

traffic-related accidents. In the conclusion of his first draft, Brian depicts the issue of safety in

fairly broad terms, linking the effects of pedestrian accidents to society at large. He also uses his

conclusion as an opportunity to recapitulate the major solutions he identifies in his body

paragraphs, which include the addition of traffic lights and clearly marked crosswalks to reduce

pedestrian fatalities.   In his revised version, however, Brian offers an entirely new paragraph

with a new approach. While he maintains the same message as his original letter, he shifts his

focus from discussing the problem in terms of the entire nation to the causes and effects felt on a

local level. This adjustment suggests a change in Brian's thinking about the kinds of material

that would appeal to a *locally* elected official, whose chief job it is to address the concerns of

local citizens, which then potentially contributes to the country as a whole. The table below

includes Brian's original conclusion on the right and his revised conclusion on the left with

specific changes underlined:

Conclusion in Letter Draft:	Conclusion in Revised Letter:
Pedestrian car accidents are a major problem in America, and specifically in [name of county]. [Name of turnpike] is a shining example of the failure of current systems to ensure the safety of pedestrians. I propose that increased placement of radar speed signs, more training of the youth to respond effectively to traffic, and increased use of simple procedures like crossing gestures, and patience at crosswalks could save many lives.	The community of [name of town] and the greater area of [name of county] have numerous roads that are very dangerous for pedestrians to traverse. This county needs to makes its roads safer for its people through the introduction of new services, and infrastructure. This change in policy would have the immediate effect of saving lives, and the added effect of increasing desirability of the area. It certainly isn't a bad thing to be able to claim that your roads are the safest for pedestrians in the state.

Brian's revisions add a level of urgency and rhetorical awareness to his conclusion that were not as apparent in his original draft. These changes potentially increase his chances of convincing his reader to take action. First, Brian begins his revised conclusion by framing the issue of pedestrian fatalities in locally-specific terms. He identifies the problem as taking place in his neighborhood community, rather than portraying it as "a major problem in America." Making this shift allows Brian to appeal more directly to his audience, who is responsible specifically for the livelihood of residents in this particular area of the country. While his original conclusion connects the severity of the problem to a national phenomenon, it minimizes the immediate effects on people living in Brian's hometown. Therefore instead of underplaying the local, yet equally important, consequences, Brian decides to highlight them in his revision and describe the "numerous roads that are very dangerous for pedestrians to traverse." Additionally, Brian replaces the phrase "I propose" from his original letter, which he uses to introduce his solutions, with a statement that explains that "this county needs to make its roads safer for its people etc." This new sentence construction allows Brian to not only expand his view of the problem beyond personal opinion, but assign responsibility to the county, and more

importantly to its officials, of which his reader is one.

As a result, Brian's new conclusion conceivably possesses greater relevance and meaning for his audience, someone in a position to oversee and make legislative decisions regarding the lives of people living and working in Brian's town. While the duties and responsibilities of a town supervisor extend proverbially beyond the local community to the nation at large, the immediate focus of this position is to serve the public on a local scale. Brian perhaps realizes this connection more fervently in his revision, which explains why his revised conclusion speaks more directly to this person's professional responsibility to advance solutions that are felt and experienced most acutely on a local level.

Brian continues to build connections with his audience by revising the tone of his letter from one that focuses on the negative outcomes of not solving the problem to one that embraces a more positive image. Originally, he argues that if current conditions are not addressed, the town is at risk of becoming a "shining example of the failure of current systems," implying that, as a member of the current system, his reader is in some way contributing to this failure. Brian uses this antagonistic tone and accusatory language as a method of motivating his audience. He intimates that if this negative image sticks, his reader will likely face public dissatisfaction and possibly a loss of future votes as a result. Given that Brian's audience looks to voters for support, his original strategy clearly demonstrates an awareness of audience; however, it lacks a level of openness and acceptance that might do more to persuade his reader than the method of assigning blame. This change in tactic is reflective of the "Yes, and" exercise, which, in the context of using improv for invention, may have influenced his decision-making. It demonstrates the process of "accepting all offers" and opens a dialogue in place of criticism and disapproval. It also speaks to Elbow's believing game in that it creates avenues of change by

allowing students to explore other perspectives by embracing them instead of criticizing or tearing them down to show evidence of critical thought. The atmosphere of acceptance surrounding "Yes, and" possibly encouraged Brian to persuade his audience from a stance of acceptance and agreement, using appeals that would focus on the positive aspects of solving the problem. In his revision, Brian argues that improved safety would "have the added effect of increasing the desirability of the area," bringing in visitors and new residents, and that "it certainly isn't a bad thing to be able to claim that your roads are the safest for pedestrians in the state." Instead of dwelling on failure, Brian makes the rhetorical decision to shift his attitude to one that invites collaboration with his audience and inspires support based on positive feelings of pride rather than culpability.

VIII. Matt's Letter

In another example, Matt demonstrated a similar shift towards greater audience awareness. Similar to Brian, he decided to write about the issue of safety, but instead of focusing on pedestrian safety, Matt chose to write to his employer about the need for safety at a local airport where he frequently worked at the time of the research study. Matt noticed unsafe maneuvering practices of airplanes on the ground, as well as insufficient signs and markings to communicate information to pilots that would assist with navigation, the movement of planes on the ground, and the avoidance of costly damages to planes due to accidents and collisions. For the most part, Matt's revised conclusion maintains his original message; however, with the small addition of new evidence and a new argument, he tailors his conclusion to fit the needs of his employer and other readers in management positions. This new information includes testimony from pilots about the airport's unsafe reputation, and an argument about the airport as a business. Matt appears to understand that management would be responsible for and highly interested in

matters of finance, as well as safety, and would be attuned to how these matters intersect. He articulates this understanding in his revision by anticipating his employer's concern over the risk of financial loss to the airport and surrounding areas if fewer pilots used the airport due to safety hazards. In the table below, I include Matt's original conclusion and his revised conclusion with the additional material underlined:

Conclusion in Letter Draft:	Conclusion in Revised Letter:
Improving these small issues with ground communication would provide tremendous benefits on the field. Safety is the number one goal of any airport management plan. Confusion is one factor that can be avoided to improve safety on the field. A simple and safe airport surface will also allow the pilots, ground crew, and passengers to get the most out of their experience to the field. I ask you to think as much about the ground as you do about the sky.	Improving these small issues with ground communication would provide tremendous benefits on the field. Safety is the number one goal of any airport management plan. Confusion is one factor that can be avoided to improve safety on the field. A simple and safe airport surface will also allow the pilots, ground crew, and passengers to get the most out of their experience to the field. Small charters and regular pilots look at safety as one of the highest criteria for returning to that airport. I have heard many pilots say things like, "avoid republic, I don't feel safe there". The field is [a] money making service that tremendously helps the local economy. The higher the reputation, the more visitors will return. I ask you to think as much about the ground as you do about the sky.

By introducing the opinions of actual pilots, Matt not only builds his credibility with first-hand knowledge, but employs fear to convince management to take action. He emphasizes the negative feelings pilots of both small and large aircrafts associate with the airport, suggesting that their collective reaction represents a much larger climate of uncertainty and worry. Given his direct contact with these pilots, Matt possesses insider knowledge that would benefit members of management, especially if those in supervisory roles are unaware of current perceptions of the airport. This revision arguably contributes to the persuasive appeal of Matt's conclusion. It holds the potential of raising management's awareness of the airport's negative

reputation among pilots, an aspect of the problem that until recently may have gone unnoticed.

Building on this awareness, Matt makes a second rhetorical decision to heighten his letter's persuasiveness: he invents an argument that links the airport's damaged reputation to a loss of revenue if fewer customers use the airport for travel. Here Matt appeals to his audience's goal of making a profit in addition to maintaining safety. He focuses on the effects of the airport's unsafe practices on the "local economy." Additionally, he expands upon his original idea of helping others "get the most out of their experience to the field" by suggesting that if this experience is negative, the airport will lose out on opportunities for economic growth. Pointing to this loss reveals Matt's keen awareness of what motivates his audience: management may be more inclined to take action if they understand that safety *and* finances are at stake. Matt's revisions not only support his well-intentioned claims, but help him develop reasons why he needs to say what he does to this specific audience. Similar to Brian, Matt also speaks to his audience's viewpoint when addressing current conditions and emphasizing long-term consequences that include effects to the airport's business health. For these reasons, his revised conclusion is conceivably more audience-focused, which may have been the result of his participating in and exposure to improvisation. It recasts the matter of airport safety into explicit and urgent terms that his readers would most likely relate to and understand.

IX. Jacob's Letter Conclusion

Focusing on a college community, Jacob decided to write to the university president about improving campus facilities, specifically the bathrooms in the residence halls where students live. Like Brian and Matt, Jacob applies and organizes evidence in ways that would be appealing and more easily recognizable to his audience in his revision. Specific to Matt's approach, Jacob spends time in his revision highlighting financial and other large scale effects of

180

a problem that might otherwise appear trivial or unimportant to outsiders, especially

administrators who do not frequent campus residence halls. Additionally, Jacob underscores

campus-wide benefits to resolving this problem, establishing a kind of ripple effect that would

lead to greater improvements in other facets of campus life. In the table below, I include Jacob's

original conclusion and his revised conclusion with new material underlined:

Conclusion in Letter Draft:	Conclusion in Revised Letter:
As an Administrator of the school another way to look at recreation of our bathrooms not as an extra expenses but rather a long term investment. If our bathrooms are cleaner then more students will be willing to live on campus because they can do so comfortably. As a result of more students living on campus there will be a jolt of all around revenue for the school from food to clothing. If the bathrooms were cleaner then maybe more students would be more inclined to stay on campus during the weekend instead of going home. If more students stayed on the weekend we would have a better campus life and more school spirit.

President Samuel L. Stanley Jr., MD, I am a concerned and angry student, but I am not the only one. I feel that the situation has been accepted for too long and is seen as being too big to fix instead of being seen as a gratifying challenge with many rewards. | As the President of our University do not look at the restoration of our bathrooms as an extra expense, but rather a long term investment. If our bathrooms are cleaner then more students will be willing to live on campus because they can do so more comfortably. As a result of more students living on campus there will be a jolt of all around revenue for the school from food to clothing. The moral[e] and spirit of our school would become better with restored bathrooms because more students would be inclined to stay on campus for the weekends instead of going home. With more students staying on the weekends Stony Brook would have a better campus life and more funding to better our sports teams and other campus events.

President Samuel L. Stanley Jr., MD; I am a concerned and angry student, but I am not the only one. I firmly believe that with higher standards for our bathrooms, here at Stony Brook University, will bring about higher standards for which we can live by. The current situation has been accepted for too long being seen as too large a problem to fix, instead of being seen as a gratifying challenge. |

From the outset, Jacob employs a more direct approach in his revision, altering his opening

sentence to address his reader as "the President of our University," rather than an "Administrator

of the school" (emphasis added). In making this change, Jacob distinguishes the significance of

his reader's job title in relation to other administrative positions on campus, and the leadership position it entails. More specifically, he connects this position to "our" university, a place and community with which he strongly identifies, thereby linking his personal plea to the larger campus.

In the same paragraph, Jacob makes several other rhetorical moves to attract his audience's attention. For one, he gives greater weight to campus-wide benefits by stating that "the moral[e] and spirit of our school would become better with restored bathrooms." Instead of waiting until the end of his paragraph to make this claim, which he does in his original, he decides to lead with it. This switch makes his letter arguably more audience-oriented because it begins with effects his reader would care more about. Along these same lines, he addresses financial aspects of solving the problem, which Matt also uses to attract his audience's attention. If more students stay on campus during the weekends as a result of better bathrooms, Jacob argues, "Stony Brook would have a better campus life and more funding to better our sports teams and other campus events" (emphasis added). Although Jacob does not say it outright, this increase in "funding" would likely stem from more students staying on campus and purchasing tickets to attend these events as well as food and other merchandise, which he only briefly mentions in his original letter.

Finally, Jacob ends his revised letter by introducing a related argument that demonstrates his growing knowledge of audience: improving the facilities in the residence halls will lead to "higher standards" across the campus in general. In his original draft, Jacob mentions this idea of creating "higher standards" in an earlier body paragraph, but it becomes buried and loses emphasis. Here, he inserts this argument in his conclusion where he mentions "higher standards" twice. This change arguably establishes a stronger lasting impression on his reader about

improving standards of quality and satisfaction regarding campus facilities and services. Jacob reasons that by starting with a relatively small adjustment like bathrooms the campus will experience a domino effect of improvements that will have far-reaching effects and possibly improve the university's reputation. While it is implied, this improved image would be highly appealing to an audience of the university president, who would be interested in boosting the university's image to increase student enrollment and potentially secure funding from outside stakeholders. By framing his problem in this way, Jacob emphasizes the significance of an issue that at first seems minor or inconsequential. These revisions illustrate what Jacob perceives as a more persuasive approach to draw in and convince his reader to make a change that will affect the lives of people both in and outside of the campus environment. With a focus on agreement and community, improvisation may have helped introduce Jacob to the possibilities of exploring alternative viewpoints. What's more, Jacob may have become more apt to imagine his topic from the stance of an influential stakeholder, and more convinced that expanding the scope of his project to include perceived outsiders would be beneficial to his cause.

Overall, these students did more than simply summarize their major claims in their conclusions, which students often misinterpret as the sole purpose of a conclusion. Instead, they provided additional evidence and, whether consciously or not, structured this information in ways that refocused sections of their writing and made the sections more appealing to their audience. These conclusions reveal a greater awareness in students' texts of the kinds of arguments and reasons that would prove more convincing to the readers of their letters. Performing improvisation may have helped students like Brian, Matt, and Jacob gain valuable insights that led to their rhetorical choices and potentially new conceptualizations of their projects. It is possible that other invention strategies, like freewriting or outlining, would have

led students to the same development of ideas and rhetorical knowledge; however, improvisation may have provided new opportunities to broaden their intellectual processes. By immersing students in speaking, listening, and writing, the improv exercises were designed to foster an exploration and acceptance of multiple perspectives, especially perspectives of stakeholders that students may not readily identify with or understand, such as the opinion of a local government official, employer, or university president. Moreover, improvisation encouraged students to move outside of their original responses to a problem they were researching. Even if students were already aware of the perspectives of outside audiences, improv may have provided ways of actually integrating new arguments and evidence into their writing, and convinced them that this awareness may strengthen their conclusions.

X. Concluding Thoughts on Students' Writing

The analysis of student writing in this chapter serves to illustrate the kinds of rhetorical thinking and decision-making that emerge when students engage with social and collaborative forms of invention such as improvisational acting. When applied specifically to a writing classroom, improv opens a space for students to invent collectively and compose lines of reasoning that respond to a rhetorical situation with the help of a live audience: their peers. Having this audience in front of them potentially helps students become more audience-conscious in their thinking and envision writing as something that happens to and for a real reader in a social context, not a vacuum. It may also encourage students to seek out assistance in their writing more often by consulting other audiences, including those working in writing centers and other student writers. While numerous factors may have influenced students to expand and revise their letters, the exercises and their contexts potentially increased students' awareness of how an audience might be affected by the choices they make in their writing.

184

Sarah, Nicole, Brian, Matt, and Jacob included information that enhanced their letters' persuasive appeal by tapping into what their audiences care about, hold in high regard, and value. By adopting techniques from improvisational acting, writing teachers can augment existing writing pedagogies and expand the reach of this approach to more students, activating students' attention to audience in their invention practices and stimulating a network of ideas that arise from speaking, listening, and writing. I argue that integrating improvisation into writing instruction will inspire students to see writing as encompassing processes of generating, stretching, rehearsing, and revising ideas in communal contexts, and will expose them to using multiple modes of expression and communication.

The next chapter adds to these observations about students' writing by addressing their reactions to improv in interviews conducted during my research study. In these interviews, students share their perceptions of how improv, including the role-play, influenced their writing processes and their conceptions of audience and invention. Students' responses offer important insights into how the principles and practices of improvisational acting might reinvigorate our teaching of invention and audience with an emphasis on listening, spontaneous decision-making, creative risk-taking, and community. These responses may also serve to remind us of the need to examine long-standing attitudes about writing as the conventional method of invention.

Chapter 5: Student Voices on Improv in the Classroom

"[The exercises] taught me to look at an issue on a wider spectrum….I still do a rough outline but now that I have an ability to think outside the box more, that the outlines are becoming more detailed and detailed and detailed….your essay-writing process is, the stress of it, is reduced substantially."   -Nate

"It kinda showed me, like, just how passionate I was about [my topic] I guess, through like verbally talking about it, because you know in paper you can have that passion, but to say it out loud, it kind of reiterates it almost and then to have to like go back and even improv the same thoughts still holds that true I guess."   -Kim

"It was actually useful to hear like that there's so many different perspectives on one thing that like you have to anticipate what the other perspective is gonna think."   -Michael

Many of us strive to create these kinds of experiences with our students, helping them to think "outside the box," learn what drives their passion, open their minds to multiple viewpoints, and "anticipate what the other perspective is gonna think." We seek opportunities to engage students in the creative flow and exchange of information, something writers do often as they play with ideas, thoughts, and language. By integrating improvisational acting into a first-year writing course, I sought to do the same. I contemplated the potential of applying improv techniques and principles to give students a chance to experience new ways of inventing that were visual, aural, verbal, and kinesthetic and would become part of the genesis of their thinking. For the most part, students reacted enthusiastically to this new approach.

Near the end of my research study, I interviewed seven students individually about their experiences with improv both in and outside the classroom, including their experiences with the improv exercises and role-play. We met once for approximately an hour in my office on campus. I asked students questions about their brainstorming habits and what they thought of

using improvisation as an alternative approach to invention, which many had never experienced

before, especially in a writing classroom. I captured their reactions by using an audio-recorder

and in this chapter I provide statements and sections from the transcripts that resulted from my

conversations with them. In those transcripts, I tried to stay as close as possible to the original

content of students' oral responses as well as their speech patterns so that I might present their

voices as accurately as possible. During the interviews, students spoke openly about what they

found helpful and challenging about performing improv. Many even expressed a growing

understanding of some of improv's underlying objectives, particularly its goal of generating

ideas through collaboration. While I articulated some of these objectives both before and during

the improvisations to enhance student engagement with such an unconventional approach,

students still made specific observations in their interviews about these objectives and the

benefits of using improv. I explained the importance of collaboration and audience in particular

to help students make connections between invention in improv and writing, and to increase their

investment in these performance methods, which are often unfamiliar and less typical to writing

instruction. The fact that students closely interacted with each other to use these methods

allowed them to explore ideas and perspectives in a communal environment that was quite

different from how they typically brainstormed. In the words of one of my students, Michael,

the exercises challenged his usual habits of inventing, but in helpful ways: "I think I brought up

a few points that I definitely wouldn't have just thought of from like sitting at my computer."

Like most students, Michael's typical approach involves working alone at a computer screen.

But during the improv activities, he was asked to think and act differently, pooling his talents and

abilities with his peers. Together, students applied multiple intelligences to their composing

processes and learned that they could discover new ideas by using alternative modes of communicating.

With its focus on community, spontaneity, and exploration, improv holds the potential to reinvigorate our teaching and motivate us, along with our students, to take new and important risks that foster invention and creativity. While improv brings together a wide range of abilities already familiar to writing courses, including inventing, drafting, and revising, it also enhances other valued processes such as collaboration, active listening, and audience awareness. It requires us to move with our students outside of conventional modes of thinking about writing and invention. With this understanding in mind, I aimed to give students an opportunity to invent and develop ideas as improvisers do, by applying both the methods and theories shaping this form of acting. From a technical and philosophical standpoint, I encouraged students to embrace a central tenet of improv, which is to treat all successes and failures, however big or small, as opportunities to think, discover, and imagine. In other words, I sought to incorporate aspects of an improv rehearsal and performance into a classroom setting. By listening to students' interviews, I learned that this approach not only stimulated their ability to experiment with new ways of inventing; it also challenged their thinking about the role of play and risk-taking in their composing processes.

The main focus of this chapter is to explore students' reactions in detail, weaving together passages and statements from their interviews that highlight several important themes running through this dissertation. First, it explores how the seemingly "random," spontaneous nature of improvising might actually lead to productive brainstorming, a concept that for many students appeared unlikely at first. I examine the value of this "randomness" as evidence of play and risk-taking while assessing how certain classroom structures, such as using improv exercises

for a writing assignment, may in fact prohibit the very idea of play. Second, this chapter emphasizes how the communal nature of improv can help students and teachers engage more freely and openly with new ideas, perspectives, and ways of thinking in a classroom space by supporting risk-taking, self-expression, and communication. The third section of the chapter addresses how using improv in a classroom can present students with opportunities to metacognitively examine their writing processes and the processes of others. An important objective of the performance-based activities I used in my study was to make explicit and visible some of the many internal processes writers experience. The improv exercises and role-play helped dramatize these processes in kinesthetic and visual ways based on their design and purpose. Students explicitly engaged with processes of acceptance and agreement, for example, through the exercise "Yes, and." They accepted their partner's suggestion, integrated it into their thinking, and quickly proposed a new idea inspired by their partner's original thought. Students responded physically and verbally to an external dialogue that, in some ways, mirrored their internal decision-making. Collaborating with peers potentially helped students develop an increased awareness of the choices they make as they invent, as well as the problem-solving procedures they undertake when composing. Students conceivably gained writing process knowledge as a result. And finally, the last section of the chapter suggests ways of creating a classroom space that invites greater engagement with play and risk-taking. One suggestion includes broadening the focus of improv so that it is not limited to the purposes of a major writing assignment only.

I. "It's kind of random": Student Reactions to Play and the Pressures of Inventing in Improv

In many respects, improvisation challenged students to interact with unfamiliar, non-print modes of inventing, specifically by speaking off the cuff, actively listening to others' ideas, and

responding spontaneously in a short time frame. In class, these interactions often resulted in bouts of laughter, confused faces, and surprised looks from students. Many expressed that rarely, if ever, had their teachers asked them to participate in performance methods, especially ones directed towards writing. They possessed little experience thinking and reacting on their feet by assuming different positions of an argument or using phrases like "Yes, and" or "Rewind." In fact, students possessed little experience with improv in general, outside of watching improv comedy shows like *Whose Line is it Anyway?* on television. Appearing in the late 1990s, this show helped introduce American viewers to improv comedy and featured the talents of many improv-comedy actors and stand-up comedians, including Ryan Stiles, Colin Mochrie, Wayne Brady, Brad Sherwood, and others. During the show, a group of four actors would perform a variety of short, improvised scenes based on suggestions from audience members or prompts given by the show's host, Drew Carey. The show returned to American television in 2013 and continues to draw its material from improv games and exercises that comprise a style of improv known as short form improvisation. Many students in my study could reference the show, but had not actually performed improv themselves. While they reacted positively to having a chance to do so, they often noted in their interviews that ideas or suggestions sometimes seemed "random" or "off track" during the improvisation. Students expressed frustration when this situation occurred and credited the "randomness" to working under the pressures of the exercises; they identified these pressures as time and having to act spontaneously (typically, I gave students approximately 5-6 minutes at a time to complete an iteration of one of the improv exercises we were performing). Ironically, though, students' reactions suggest that the improv exercises were actually working. When ideas went "off track," they were potentially engaging with ideas freely and playing with possibilities by exchanging

information with each other, even if these ideas did not immediately seem on topic or connect to an overall argument students were exploring.

Reflecting on her experience with the "Yes, and" exercise, Nicole described moments when "we got really really into like *random* things that I wouldn't include [in the letter]" and "the only thing was that we got *off track* a lot" (emphasis added). Similarly, Sarah reports observations of her peers' experiences: "I know some people got to like a really *random* point where 'Yes, and,' it was completely *off topic*" (emphasis added). For the most part, students used the word "random" to indicate ideas and moments that appeared to deviate from a central goal or theme they identified before starting the exercises. They envisioned the "randomness" as a negative aspect of the exercises. Ahmed explicitly described this feature as a potential disadvantage of working with improv: "sometimes under pressure you just think of like an idea, where you just think of something kind of *random* and that kind of veers you off the *right track*….so like that's one of like the cons I guess" (emphasis added). Repeatedly, students defined being "sidetracked" or "off the right track" as a detour from a desired path of generating pertinent information that supported the topic of their writing assignments. This detour stood out as an obstacle or problem that students attempted to avoid so that they could easily fit a new idea into an imagined thought pattern, which would help them achieve their perceived goal of working towards the letter-writing assignment. When they were unsuccessful with this perceived task, students often felt uncomfortable and frustrated. In fact, one student sounded almost apologetic for having strayed from a central topic with his partner. Nate explained that when participating in "Yes, and," "there would be times when you just got *sidetracked, I'll admit,* and then it was just, like, that was the hardest part of it, but I mean in the end like that only happened after a couple of times where we had been going on it for awhile and we

191

just….what else could we possibly say?" (emphasis added). In his own words, Nate tries to reassure me that he and his partner became "sidetracked" just a few times near the end of the exercise. He emphasizes a difference he sees between what they experienced at the end of the exercise and the beginning, which included responses that were conceivably on track. During the interview, I noticed that Nate's voice even dropped slightly in tone and volume when he explained, "you just got sidetracked, I'll admit." Nate's verbal response and intonation are highly revealing. He appears so focused on inventing for a specific purpose that he understood the exercise to have a right and a wrong outcome. Like many students, his efforts seemed guided by the perceived expectation that he must produce a certain kind of response, which signified success, while all others were seen as unhelpful or flat out failures.

The fact that students read these "random" ideas as set-backs instead of opportunities for inventing reflects an important distinction from how improvisers might interpret these same occurrences. In an improv rehearsal or live performance, improvisers accept "random," bizarre responses as a necessary part of playing with ideas. They understand that these ideas, which may not always fit a given scene or exercise, often emerge from risk-taking, since improvisers cannot predict where or how a scene will end. To be successful, improv performers learn to play spontaneously by taking chances knowing that other performers will support them, but without "playing it safe." Improv director and performer, Mick Napier, explains that "unfortunately, good improvisation has nothing to do with safety or appropriateness. (As a matter of fact, it's quite the opposite)" (11). Improvisation involves negotiating the fear of making a mistake with letting go of the need to "get it right" in a scene or exercise. To do this, improvisers practice accepting whatever comes their way in the form of an idea from a fellow actor, a suggestion from an audience member, or a detail they themselves contribute. Through working with other

192

improvisers, the "bizarre" and "weird" can sometimes inspire new discoveries that might not otherwise emerge or, in the very least, help maintain the constant flow or exchange of ideas, which is so vital to improv.

One of the best places for students to see this kind of flow in action, outside of watching a live improv performance, is to view clips from television shows such as *Whose Line is it Anyway?*. In future semesters, I plan to use these clips with students as a way of introducing them to improv and providing them with an idea of how improv performers invent through constant exploration and discovery. Instructors interested in taking advantage of the methods of improv in a writing classroom might show video clips as a way of preparing students for this type of brainstorming while focusing on the importance of play and risk-taking. Students can observe the actors' creative risks as they generate new lines of dialogue and new material that may appear wild or zany. Improv actors tend to concentrate more on playing with ideas rather than worrying about whether these ideas fit neatly and logically within a scene, which students will likely notice. Showing students a clip from Season 8 of *Whose Line*, for example, can help them better understand this aspect of improv. In this clip, actors Colin Mochrie, Ryan Stiles, and Brad Sherwood perform an improv game called "Quick Change" in which they improvise a scene but must change the last statement or action they make whenever they hear another improviser, who acts as the scene's director, shout the word "change" from off-stage.[42] This element of the game affects only one actor at a time and forces that actor to continuously invent new responses to an existing scene until the director stops interjecting. To demonstrate the range of these responses, I have transcribed the beginning of the clip from *Whose Line* below, although

---

[42] This game is similar to the "Rewind" exercise I used with students in my research study. I have seen versions of this game referred to as "New Choice," "Different Choice," or "Actually," which Adar Cohen uses in his article for *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. These versions tend to work under the same premise of prompting actors to improvise new responses to a given situation on the spot.

I recommend showing students the entire clip for the full effect. During this version of "Quick Change," the three actors improvise the following imagined scenario: a meeting between the President of the United States, an army general, and the President's wife, all of whom are reacting to some unnamed crisis facing the country. Actor Brad Sherwood plays the role of army general and begins the scene, while Ryan Stiles acts as the president and Colin Mochrie as the first lady. Sherwood is interrupted several times by actor Wayne Brady, who says "change" from off-stage, prompting Sherwood to invent a new opening line each time:

> Sherwood: I've drawn up some plans, Mr. President. I think that you can see that this is the main theater of war.
> Brady: [*Off-stage*] Change.
> Sherwood: Look at this, I've drawn a picture on a place mat. It's you in a canoe.
> Brady: [*Off-stage*] Change.
> Sherwood: How about this lovely photograph of me with the Teletubbies.
> Brady: [*Off-stage*] Change.
> Sherwood: I've laminated a large picture of a postage stamp. What you might look like when you're old and dead.

Each time Brady interrupts the scene, Sherwood makes a different choice about what he is showing the president during their improvised meeting. His responses fluctuate from discussing military plans to a photograph with lovable, children's television characters to a postage stamp. Overall, his choices vary widely in theme and lack a cohesive focal point; however, each response reflects Sherwood's effort to play with new ideas without adhering to a certain pattern or set of expectations. He also understands that his fellow actors will likely accept whatever suggestion he provides and incorporate it into the reality of the scene, thereby supporting his risk-taking. Students, on the other hand, may have expected Sherwood to remain within the theme of military strategies or approaches, which in this case did not happen. Watching and discussing this clip with students reinforces the highly spontaneous and unpredictable nature of

194

improv. It provides an inside glimpse into the kinds of individual and collaborative processes

that shape how improv actors generate ideas off the cuff without engaging in right/wrong

thinking or pre-planning ideas using pre-determined forms.

Showing students these types of clips can also boost their confidence in creative risk-

taking by allowing them to hear audience members respond with laughter to each of Sherwood's

wild choices. It is important, however, to explain to students that while *Whose Line* is recorded

before a live studio audience and includes improvised scenes, viewers at home watch an edited

version of the show. Directors and producers choose the funniest improvised material to

broadcast on television, which suggests that not every improvised choice results in the same

level of boisterous laughter and therefore does not make it into the final cut of the show. Despite

this scripted quality, *Whose Line* arguably presents students with moments of improvised

material that can help shape their perceptions of what it means to play with ideas. For instance,

instead of reading Sherwood's alternate choices as "mistakes" for straying away from a central

topic, students might see them as different avenues for the characters to explore: What might

happen if the president and army general focused their strategic planning on creating a place mat

or a photograph of Teletubbies? What effects would this have on society? Would people benefit

from government leaders paying more attention to children's toys? In the dramatic world of the

improvised scene, the possibilities are endless.

By watching this scene as an introduction to improv, students would likely come away

with the understanding that for improvisers the guiding principle is just to play without judging

ideas as "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad." At the same time, though, it is important to

explain to students that improvisers understand the value of discerning "strong" choices from

"weak" ones, especially when trying to establish the reality of a scene, or moving a scene

forward in time and plot. For example, denying another improviser's idea instead of accepting it demonstrates a "weak" choice. It negates the improviser's original thought as well as her efforts to help create the environment of the scene. Another example of a "weak" choice is when improvisers focus too heavily in their dialogue on past or future actions. This choice can prevent improv actors from concentrating on their present actions, which help drive the content of the performance and capture the audience's attention. When using improv in a writing classroom then, it is helpful for instructors to share these considerations with students. While improvisers invent freely, they understand it is not the case that "anything goes" in the world of improv. As with writing, what defines an idea as "good" or "bad" depends largely on context, purpose, audience, and message. That said, improv performers try to resist being ruled entirely by a mindset of correctness. Actor Jim O'Heir explains in a podcast with the entire cast of the recent television show *Parks and Recreation* that "In improv, there's success and failure and it doesn't really matter." The focus of the art form is having the freedom to take creative chances without drawing attention to errors and mistakes. The show *Parks and Recreation* boasts the talents of a cast of actors with various backgrounds in improvisational acting and stand-up comedy. Trained in improvisation at The Second City theater in Chicago, O'Heir is most known for his role as Jerry, a clumsy office employee under the direction of Leslie Knope, the show's leading character played by improv icon Amy Poehler. Knope is an overly optimistic bureaucrat in charge of the Parks and Recreation Department of the imaginary town of Pawnee, Indiana. The show follows her life and the lives of her employees as they try to improve the environment surrounding the local community while meeting with resistance from local citizens and government officials. Poehler has acted in the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* and is one of the founding members of the Upright Citizens Brigade theater in NYC, a widely known

training ground for actors studying improvisation. Poehler has also studied and performed

improv at the The Second City theater, which many improv teachers, trainers, and actors

consider to be the birthplace of American improv, given Viola Spolin's influence there along

with the efforts of her son, Paul Sills, who advanced his mother's work and cofounded Second

City. While *Parks and Recreation* is mostly scripted, elements of improv abound as actors

appear to draw from their work with improv, which O'Heir's quote suggests. Showing students

clips from this show as well as *Whose Line* can provide a valuable teaching tool to highlight how

improv is used to generate creative material.[43]

During an improv rehearsal, actors arguably experience greater freedom to explore ideas

and choices than they would within the confines of a show, where the stakes of producing a

certain response to make audiences laugh are much higher. In rehearsal, improv performers can

practice risk-taking and build the confidence needed to trust what may at first appear "random"

or "off track" and fight against the desire to pre-plan a scene or exercise before it happens.

When using improv in a writing classroom, we might imagine improv exercises and activities as

opportunities for students to practice developing the freedom to play with ideas in a rehearsal-

style space, leading up to an improv performance or show, a final writing assignment. That way

we might increase students' ability and desire to invent more freely without judging or second-

guessing an idea out of fear of making a mistake. Students can practice engaging with this

---

[43] Instructors interested in showing students clips from *Parks and Recreation* might consider presenting episode 10 of Season 2 titled "The Hunting Trip." In a scene from this episode, Leslie Knope appears to be improvising different responses when she is asked to explain to a Park Ranger the circumstances of a hunting accident that has injured her boss, Ron Swanson. Students can watch as actor Amy Poehler delivers each response, which, given the visual style of the scene, appear to be improvised. Each response seems to be captured in a different take of video and then edited so that viewers watch an uninterrupted series of responses. As a result, Knope's responses in the show look like they have been spontaneously improvised, even if actor Amy Poehler most likely worked from a script. In either case, the appearance of Knope's responses give students an idea of what it means to try out a range of ideas to a given situation.

concept of play while developing a discerning eye towards thoughts, ideas, and perspectives that contribute to the moment of creation as well as an end product.

By speaking with students during their interviews, I discovered another contributing factor to their interpretation of "random" ideas as a negative aspect of improv: the environment surrounding the improv exercises. Instead of designing the exercises strictly for an improv stage or rehearsal space, I adapted them to meet the needs and goals of an introductory writing classroom, and I structured them as invention strategies for an assignment that I later evaluated and graded for course credit. I introduced students to improv through this assignment so that I might localize their experience to a specific piece of writing and more closely track their revisions from one draft to the next. For example, in the "Yes, and" exercise, students created statements that reflected a stance for their letters, and then used the exercise to help them generate reasons for or against that specific standpoint. Understandably then, when an idea or suggestion arose that did not immediately help students explore an aspect of this standpoint, either a reason or argument for or against it, or their topic in general, students labeled it as "random." While I encouraged students to resist the desire to judge or evaluate an idea on the spot, the fact that they participated in the improv exercises for a teacher-generated assignment largely explains some of their reactions, and their desire to "get it right" for the teacher. Their perceived purpose of focusing on the assignment potentially interfered with their ability to invent for the sake of play or exploration.

When asked about another improv activity used for the assignment, "Rewind," Michael admits to evaluating his responses instead of accepting all of them as part of invention: "You realize like that [a response] didn't *sound right* and then you make a better one the next time" (emphasis added). In the "Rewind" exercise, students were asked to provide a different response

to a statement about their letter drafts each time their partner said the word "Rewind." Students had to think quickly on their feet and react in a new way each time. For example, students began a statement with "I could start my letter by. . ." and then provided a different ending with each go-around. The statement potentially helped students invent various ways of introducing their letters. Michael's reaction suggests that if one of his responses to the exercise did not "sound right," perhaps because he might not actually use it in his letter, it might not "be right" for the exercise. When faced with a response or idea that sounded "wrong," he tried to make it "better" in the next instant of the exercise. Michael's approach likely created added pressure, which may have motivated him to pre-plan his next response. Acting spontaneously, he may have reasoned, would impede his goal of generating "correct" and appropriate material. However, he does not appear paralyzed by the perceived failure of producing a "wrong" idea. His comment suggests that he is able to move forward in the next moment of the exercise without falling silent or giving up, which is significant. Although the assignment may have played a significant role in his decision-making, the improv exercises may have helped him develop the confidence and ability to continue inventing without experiencing writer's block or anxiety. He is encouraged to continue exploring in a free-thinking environment.

Since the improv exercises were linked to a high-stakes writing assignment, it is not surprising that students used the project as a yardstick to measure their ideas and decisions. When they came across an idea that did not immediately make sense or fit within a framework or topic related to the assignment, they considered it less successful. Students may have also felt self-conscious about participating in a new approach for such a weighty assignment. The freedom to play and discover by using improv was penned in by the fear of making a mistake that could potentially lead to a poor grade. Students perhaps associated doing well with the

199

exercises with doing well on the assignment. Understandably then, they were less likely to take

risks and see the value in engaging with play, especially since the risk of trying something new

was tied to their academic performance.

Another contributing factor to students' experiences that I had not anticipated is the kind

of audience interaction they received during the exercises as compared to what would typically

happen during an improv performance. Usually within a live show, improvisers are guided by

the reactions of audience members. They make decisions to ensure that ideas will "land" with an

audience and achieve a desired effect: laughter.[44] When audiences immediately laugh and

guffaw at an idea, they positively reinforce an improviser's choice and potentially convince her

that a "random" idea she offered was a strong decision for a scene. As a result, improvisers learn

the value in taking risks on stage. Therefore improv not only thrives on risk-taking, it rewards it.

The more laughter improvisers receive, the more likely they are to believe that "randomness"

works. In the case of my students, "random" ideas often produced laughter amongst each other;

however, students were not necessarily convinced that they should pursue these ideas in their

writing. Two major reasons for this difference are that their primary audiences were distant

readers not present during their improvising and that their interaction with these audiences was

chiefly conveyed through writing. In many ways, students invented ideas for a delayed sense of

gratification and accomplishment. They generated material that would be used later in the

drafting, revising, and reworking of their letters and they would have to wait for a response from

---

[44] It is important to note that not all improv is required to be funny. In fact, Charna Halpern explains that "One of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is attempting to be funny," which takes attention away from collaborating with an ensemble of actors (23). Citing Halpern, improv performer and teacher Rob Kozlowski writes that "the humor that comes from improvisation grows organically, through the simple act of complete agreement" (2). Improvisation depends on the work of many who accept and build upon the suggestions of the group, not expend energy on quick jokes and one-liners.

their target audience, which may never come. Additionally, the desired response they were looking to achieve did not necessarily involve laughter.

This is not to say that the remote readers of students' letters did not benefit from the processes and methods students used for invention. The improv exercises may have heightened students' awareness of audience. However, students' risk-taking may not have been fully supported or rewarded given the positioning of their main audience, their peers, who still provided feedback in the form of verbal and non-verbal reactions that helped shape students' ideas. Students could observe each other respond and then imagine how their outside audience might react, reading their partners' smiles, frowns, or confused looks as signs that might guide the drafting of their letters. Using improv to invent primarily for a reading audience instead of a live one may have prevented students from seeing risk-taking as equally valuable and intellectually productive as they might have if the circumstances were different.

II. Where "Random" Can Help: The Benefits of Pressure

While students became frustrated when the exercises seemed to run out of steam or drift "off track," there are signs that they embraced the structures of improv and found that the pressure to play with ideas by thinking on the spot was beneficial to their brainstorming. Several students acknowledged that at times the pressure to react quickly helped them speak and think in new ways. In fact, in many cases, students surprisingly used the word "random" again, but this time to describe positive aspects of inventing under pressure. For these students, "random" did not always translate into a "bad" or undesirable turnout. For example, Sarah explains that being forced to generate "random," or unrelated, ideas actually helped her discover new material for her letter: "I mean I guess it's good cuz sometimes it'll just, maybe an idea will suddenly come and you're like 'Oh, I wouldn't have thought of that if I [didn't] just *randomly* like forced myself

201

to think about the subject,' so in that sense I think it was a really cool idea" (emphasis added). Sarah recognizes the pressure of having to give responses "randomly" as beneficial to her composing processes. When I asked her later in her interview about how the exercises compared to brainstorming alone, she shared that "sometimes people can give you an outlook you wouldn't have ever thought of, which it happens to me a lot because I tend to not think outside the box, so having someone else around just to throw out *random* ideas is always helpful" (emphasis added). Here the "random" ideas are helpful, especially when Sarah is able to work with others, who are also reacting to the same pressure and who can help her gain a new "outlook" that expands her thinking on a given topic. Her responses highlight the benefits of inventing under pressure using improv, while also underscoring the communal aspects of inventing in this context. For Sarah, having someone with her to help generate "random ideas" exposes her to alternative perspectives and increases her ability to "think outside the box," which experienced writers also find difficult to do.

Similarly, Michael reacted positively to the pressures of the improv exercises, which helped him generate new ideas on the spot. For the letter assignment, he choose to write to his EMT supervisors, requesting a change from having to use printed forms to equipping each EMT with a device similar to an iPad to record and transmit patient information at the scene of an emergency. In his reaction to using "Rewind," he explains, "It was pretty fun. It was kinda helpful too because when I like thought quick on my feet to give a different response, it kinda brought up like other points that I could write about." In his interview, Michael specifically mentioned that the exercises helped him revise the introduction of his letter and think more deeply about the effects of this technology on his readers, other EMTs, and patients. By thinking "quick on his feet," Michael was able to generate a range of responses during the exercises,

which he later drew from as he considered ways of strengthening his letter. Sarah's and Michael's responses suggest that working in pressurized situations can motivate students to not only discover new material, but also crystallize or synthesize information that later influences a piece of writing.

Not only did the pressure to produce "random" ideas prove beneficial for some students, it also allowed others, ironically, a level of freedom to think in new ways. Nicole explains in her reaction to the "Yes, and" exercise that "you weren't like thinking it over in your mind like, is this right, is it wrong….you're just going with it and if something came up then that was good and if it didn't, like doesn't really matter." Nicole's comment echoes the words of actor Jim O'Heir when he explains that in improvisation "it doesn't really matter." Nicole experiences the same kind of freedom to say anything without judging her response or fixating on producing the "right" answer. She identifies a flow or exchange of ideas that results from this freedom as "just going with it." As we saw in Chapter 4, a major goal of "Yes, and" from a philosophical standpoint is to foster acceptance and to open up students to the possibilities of embracing whatever happens when they play spontaneously with ideas. In Nicole's case, the improv exercises prompted her to give a response even when she thought she did not have one to give. When discussing "Rewind," she shares, "I mean I didn't always know what to say, but it kind of forced me to think of something that I would say." Both exercises appear to help Nicole imagine new possibilities she had not originally planned out and accept them without worrying about the outcome.

Similarly, Kim experienced a sense of freedom while working under the pressure of continuously offering ideas and suggestions during the improv exercises. When I asked her about what it was like speaking off the cuff instead of writing down her responses ahead of time,

she stated: "It was definitely more *free,* I think, because sometimes if, if you're writing you can get like stuck in your own head, or you just, you kind of do get stuck in that perspective, but if you're just out there letting it all flow it's just more creative and I guess….I don't know, it's not as like stressful almost because you know that you can just let it out and they're gonna work back and forth with you to get it right and it's not like this is the absolute final writing almost" (emphasis added). In comparison to writing, Kim notes that her experience with improv is less restrictive and that "letting it all flow [is] just more creative." She is able to tap into a reserve of imagination and innovation instead of "get[ting] stuck in [her] own head." She associates the spontaneity and freedom of improvisation with a kind of creative release that frees her from becoming limited by her own thoughts or perspective. Her creativity stems from a recognizable "flow" of ideas that in her mind arises more from speaking off the cuff than pre-planning responses by writing them down. The need to invent again and again in the moment establishes a link of communication with other students and formalizes an exchange of information. As ideas, thoughts, and opinions move and growly freely, students are less likely to "get stuck" or trapped by one though pattern or frame of mind. This movement encourages unrestrained processes of discovery and experimentation.

Kim and Nicole's responses also highlight another important benefit of improv when used in a writing classroom: reducing writer's block. Mike Rose asserts that those students experiencing writer's block often apply "rigid or inappropriate rules, or inflexible or confused plans" to their composing processes that hinder instead of guide their progress with writing (393). His research on this phenomenon suggests that students, as well as professional writers, cannot do their best work when the structures and methods they use produce anxiety. Improv, on the other hand, holds the potential of minimizing stress related to writing by offering students

composing processes that are perhaps more flexible and open to the generation of ideas.

According to Kim's interview specifically, she realizes that being spontaneous increases her

freedom to be creative and this spontaneity originates from processes of inventing that are not

necessarily tied to a final product. In her response, she expresses that her stress level decreases

with the knowledge that what she produces during the exercises does not represent her "absolute

final writing." Part of the freedom she experiences then is the ability to try out new ideas and

experiment with new ways of thinking without having the last word on a particular topic or

subject matter. This lack of finality, which she associates with the exercises, stands in contrast to

the product-oriented view many students shared. They measured each "random" idea against the

parameters of the letter-writing assignment. Kim, as well as Nicole, embraces the freedom of

letting go instead of feeling "stuck" or locked into producing ideas for a final piece of writing.

She envisions the ability of speaking off the cuff spontaneously as an advantage to her thinking

and creativity. Even though many students may have felt as if they were inventing for the

assignment only, others may have been less restricted by this final product when engaging with

improv. Kim understood that during the exercise she could give in to "letting it all flow" and say

anything, even if it sounded "off track" or "random," and that after the exercise she could go

back later and revise or rework her ideas. Improvisation can help students develop flexible

processes of inventing and learn to trust these methods, which can assist with the further

generation of ideas.

What appeared to be a disadvantage to some students, working under pressure, acting

spontaneously, and having little time to think, turned out to be an advantage to others. Students'

positive reactions to improvising on the spot emphasize the value of inventing under pressure.

Pressure, created in this case by the improv exercises, motivates students to generate material

quickly, leaving little room for judgment or second-guessing. It also generates a level of

freedom to invent and share new thoughts as they are being dreamt up and worked through

collectively. Placing students in this type of pressurized situation compels them to work and

think in productive ways that contribute to their ability to invent. The intellectual discomfort that

arises when faced with "random" and seemingly unhelpful ideas forces students to forge new

connections and relationships between pieces of information that they might not see or

understand in less pressurized situations. Pressure, therefore, can be a productive constraint that

opens students to new avenues of imagination and innovation.

III. Invested in Collaboration

The creative freedom students experienced also developed in part from the collaboration

that took place during the improv exercises. In their interviews, students noted that working with

others to brainstorm as opposed to working alone offered key benefits, including the support to

explore new perspectives and opinions. As Kim mentions above, "you know that you can just let

it out and *they're* gonna work back and forth with you to get it right" (emphasis added). She is

counting on the fact that other students will help her work through whatever examples, reasons,

or ideas that emerge from being spontaneous; her job is simply to just "let it out." This creative

release is dependent on the security of knowing that she can trust other students to collaborate

with her and contribute positively to brainstorming. She relies on the strengths of others and the

collective strength that comes from working together. Much like in improv, her relationship with

her peers plays a significant role in establishing and sustaining a "flow" or exchange of ideas.

To use Kim's words, this "back and forth" process requires reciprocation, but also produces

feelings of trust and support that motivate students to take chances with their ideas that they

might not in more isolated contexts. Brainstorming in this type of collaborative environment

gives Kim more freedom to create and pursue her own ideas with the security of being and guided assisted by her peers. As part of a group, students are more likely to develop confidence in tackling new and challenging approaches and to feel less restricted by the fear of making a mistake. Students are potentially less afraid of failure because they are inventing within a community that offers support and helps manage the pressure of producing something right away.

In a similar case, Nate shared that collaborating with others helped him generate new material for his letter that he later decided to use in order to convince his target audience. For this assignment, Nate chose to write a letter to his town supervisor about the importance of cleaning up a neighborhood park. With some enthusiasm, Nate explained in his interview that during the "Yes, and" exercise, his partner suggested new reasons for improving park conditions that he had not originally considered. For example, his partner recommended repairing, or even replacing, run-down playground equipment that might pose a risk to the safety of children and their families when visiting the park. Hearing the suggestion, Nate reported, convinced him to consider other factors in addition to pollution and litter that might persuade his reader. Ultimately, Nate, included his partner's ideas into his writing as a way of strengthening his argument. He became so motivated by the collaborative advantage of using "Yes, and" to explore his argument that he wanted to help other students experience the same benefit: "I guess I was trying, when it wasn't my turn, to think about what was the next thing I was going to say, just so that way, I mean, I could provide others kids with ideas for their own topics cuz they provided it for me so, I think I could return the favor." For Nate, helping others produce ideas directly relevant to their persuasive letters took on immense importance over producing "random," spontaneous responses. He wanted to "return the favor" by keeping the exercise on

topic so that his partner could potentially find reasons, examples, or arguments to incorporate into the letter assignment. While Nate's efforts reiterate that students were likely inventing more for the assignment than for the sake of play and exploration, his reaction suggests the value to students of brainstorming as a communal activity. Nate knew the stakes of the exercises were high given the fact that they were tied to a major writing assignment for the course. However, he wanted to reciprocate the help he received from other students, which translated into thinking ahead to provide responses that were "on track." Nate conceivably did not want to risk "getting it wrong," since it would mean potentially depriving fellow students of the benefits he encountered.

Nate's overarching goal of helping others reflects a positive aspect of improvisational acting, which is to create and maintain community. Although Nate tried to pre-plan his ideas as a result, he became so invested in the community he established with his partner that he made a conscious effort to think carefully about what he would say next. This investment suggests that Nate recognized the advantages of working in a community with other students, who served not only as co-collaborators, but audiences for each other's ideas and writing. On the one hand, Nate may have missed out on the chance to play with ideas spontaneously; however, he seems to have learned an important lesson about the value of community, especially given his desire to recreate his positive experience of collaborating with another student. Nate observed the significance of working with others towards a communal goal, which is an essential element in improvisational acting. Improv performers learn to see themselves always as "supporting actors," working to support and trust their fellow actors as their "prime responsibility" (Halpern *Art by Committee* 21). Nate, like Kim, potentially grasped this principle over the course of the exercises. While inventing with other students, he discovered his role as a member within a community and that

208

membership required a certain level of commitment to his partner's overall project as well as his own. He attempted to fulfill this commitment by concentrating on offering support through listening and responding to his fellow group members.

Using improv to foster community can benefit writing students and teachers as well as other groups in a variety of settings. In fact, researchers outside of Composition Studies argue that improvisational acting can help groups of people learn to think, work, and act as a community. Writing in the field of social work, Caitlin Steitzer outlines the shared histories between social work and improv comedy and argues for the benefits of bringing improv techniques and practices into a social work group. In her 2011 article "The Brilliant Genius: Using Improv Comedy in Social Work Groups," she writes that "although occasionally one might see a one-person improv show or a two-person team, improv comedy is primarily a group endeavor" (271). Improvisers rely on each other to meet the needs and goals of a larger group, contributing their strengths and abilities as they think and work together. Members of a social work group, she asserts, act similarly and by applying the structures of improv comedy to social work groups, practitioners can help members "develop specific skills such as active listening, risk-taking, group mind, and community engagement" (280). As I mention in earlier chapters, "group mind" is a significant feature of establishing community within improv comedy. By thinking and working as a group, improvisers learn to elevate group goals over individual ones, while supporting each other's actions and decision-making. From these actions, improvisers deepen their connection and commitment to community.

Working in a classroom community, my students realized that someone else would be there to help them generate ideas, which in some ways helped relieve certain pressures. Kim points out that producing ideas with other students while speaking off the cuff fostered a creative

release and gave her the freedom to try out new ideas in their nascent form. She could rely on others to help her develop thoughts and opinions without having to work alone or immediately funnel ideas into a final piece of writing. Nate's reaction suggests that students understand the communal aspects of improv, which may help them see the similar role community plays in writing as well. Over the course of the improv exercises, students invented collaboratively, tapping into a collective bedrock of knowledge and experience that expanded their viewpoint and introduced them to new ways of conceptualizing their subject matter. Ideas shifted and changed as each student introduced a new piece of information to the group improvisation. Together, students contributed to the evolution of each other's ideas, while being exposed to a diversity in thought and perspective. With attention to metacognition and the help of instructors, students can use their experience with improv as a framework to draw connections to social dimensions of writing by which writing shapes and is shaped by communities of writers, readers, and texts.

IV. Dramatizing Process

While improvising, students had the opportunity to generate ideas collaboratively in a community of their peers and their teacher. They also had a chance to learn about the kinds of processes that comprise their thinking and the thinking of others. By watching each other listen and respond to new ideas on the spot, students gained a live view of the drama of inventing. They observed others create, interpret, and synthesize information in ways unavailable if they worked alone. Inventing with and in front of other people potentially drew their attention to certain internal, mental habits that often go unnoticed without direct consideration. Students could think and invent aloud in a context that not only invited collaboration, but also offered a focused look at their habits of learning. For example, Nate explains that the "Yes, and" exercise helped him better understand the thought processes that describe his approach to inventing:

I guess you do ["Yes, and"] without even realizing it when you're even just thinking about ideas, what to write, so it's like you're doing it like, like you're not even thinking about it. It just happens. Cuz you just go like I could talk about this, then this, then this, and this and this and then how you know, bring it all back to what originally you had. So I think, I think I may have been even doing it before even the exercise and it's just like now I realize it's what it pretty much is. It's just about thinking about more ideas to bring up in order to strengthen your argument.

For Nate, the "Yes, and" exercise provides a way for him to gain access to some of the mental moves he already makes "without even realizing it." It explicitly emphasized certain tacit, subconscious processes, such as accepting and building upon ideas, and in turn made them visible. In other words, the exercise mirrored back to Nate what he does to generate and gather ideas, which gives him a metacognitive glimpse into what he does when he writes. According to his response, Nate typically accepts ideas as they emerge, propelling his thinking forward as he forms associations between new ones and connects them back to a larger framework. By revealing these mental steps, the exercise increases Nate's awareness of his own writing process. What he previously took for granted because "it just happen[ed]" now becomes an integral part of his knowledge base. With the help of "Yes, and," he is better able to articulate the processes that undergird his inventing and give them a name and describe them in greater detail. As a result, Nate potentially develops a deeper, more sophisticated, understanding of his abilities as a writer. His newfound knowledge may influence how he approaches future writing situations.

One way of interpreting Nate's increased knowledge of writing process is to imagine the "Yes, and" exercise as a dramatization of what students experience internally. The exercise taps into students' process knowledge by dramatizing, or exaggerating, thought processes used to discover, shape, and convey meaning. Since these processes are often abstract in nature, the dramatization serves to present them in tangible, visible steps. In the most direct sense, students

211

practice processes of accepting and building upon ideas through their use of the phrase "Yes, and." By saying "Yes," students are compelled to receive ideas positively, accepting them as a viable option in a series of ideas. Next, students integrate these ideas into their own thinking, and then by saying "and," add onto an existing idea, thereby increasing its validity and importance. These steps parallel thought processes that motivate students to adopt a specific mind frame when faced with new ideas, and encourage students to directly engage with the principle of agreement, which is vital to improv. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the "Yes, and" exercise helps students visually, kinesthetically, and aurally understand Elbow's believing game of accepting arguments as truthful and valid before poking holes in them with doubt and disbelief. Elbow argued for greater attention to the believing game, although he recognized that both believing and doubting are necessary processes. This same exercise can help students develop an awareness of how they come to accept ideas by "physicalizing" related processes. In her explanation of theater techniques, Viola Spolin argues that "'physicalization' provides the student with a personal concrete experience (which he can grasp) on which his further development depends (15). Through "Yes, and," students participate in a visual, kinesthetic, and aural exchange that offers a "concrete experience" of certain mental operations. Spolin also maintains that physicalization "opens the door for insight" and involves "the actor in an evolving world of direct perception" (15). In Nate's experience, "Yes, and" "open[ed] the door" for increased knowledge about his writing process. By listening, speaking, and collaborating with other students, he is made more aware of his own writing processes while being confronted with his own thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities. He not only gains a deeper understanding of what he does when he invents, but might be better able to do this on his own after gaining a heightened awareness and a language to describe his internal processes.

In addition to dramatizing students' own mental processes, the improv exercises can help introduce students to the processes of others and thereby help them gain access to new perspectives. At the same time Nate reflects on his own processes, he explains that working with his peers exposed him to how others think, what choices they make, and what new ideas spring from different suggestions. He is able to observe how they move from one idea to the next, which revealed new modes of thinking and communicating: "I guess when you're watching someone do it, you're kind of doing it in your head as well, so when you see what she, what he or she came up with it's like, 'Oh, I never even thought of that.' So you see where, how he or she is different, what's her state of mind, what, how . . . what's her mode of thinking, so yeah I think that . . . watch[ing] someone does help. Cuz that just brings up another idea you can talk about." By participating in the exercises, Nate acquires a front row seat to someone else's thinking. He is able to gain an inside look at how another student conceptualizes an idea as well as where her intellectual path diverges from his own. At the same time, he is exposed to another perspective and another "mode of thinking." His partner brings a set of inclinations, aptitudes, and attitudes to the exercises that Nate could potentially learn from and integrate into his own strengths and weaknesses. This interaction increases the chances that Nate might expand his repertoire of strategies and learn to think in new ways by being exposed to someone else's thought processes.

Similarly, Kim finds that she is able to think beyond her own point of view when improvising with other students. In her overall reaction to using improv, she explains that, "it definitely gave you that new perspective, getting into someone else's paper, into their thoughts, and having them get into yours, and just helped you like, not only like hear their thoughts, but then like get out of your mindset, like take a step back, and look at it fresh." Being immersed in

213

another students' paper propels Kim into someone else's thoughts, forcing her to step outside of her individual perspective. She engages in the mental exercise of examining how other people might respond to an idea or argument and their reasons for reacting differently from what she expected. She is perhaps better able to imagine other possible viewpoints and embody another's perspective by "getting into someone else's paper" and by extension their thinking. The fact that this process is reciprocal and communal adds to Kim's experiences. Not only does she gain an awareness of audience, she also develops "metacognitive distance" that allows her to see her writing anew (Dunn 1). To use her words, Kim is able to re-envision her own writing by "tak[ing] a step back and look[ing] at it fresh."

V. "Improvising" the Writing Classroom: Future Considerations

Students' reactions to improv, particularly its spontaneity, risk-taking, and creative thinking, all demonstrate that the way they experience it in a classroom matters. If they experience it through helpful collaboration, a sense of community, and the creative freedom to explore new ideas without worrying about mistakes, they will likely see its value. They may even consider adopting improv techniques outside of class as invention strategies and in the long-term as a mode of thinking. If, on the other hand, students experience improv without feeling successful, without seeing the benefits of playing with unplanned ideas, and without understanding that "random" thoughts can spark discovery, they may likely disregard the place of improv in a writing classroom. One way to positively shape students' experiences with improv is to pay close attention to its application. Constructing a classroom environment that mirrors the techniques and principles of an improv rehearsal or performance presents significant and worthwhile challenges. For one, improv demands play, which seems antithetical to students and teachers who characterize writing as "serious" intellectual work. Many define academic

writing as engaging with "critical" thought, which, as Peter Elbow has long pointed out, often translates into disagreement and disbelief when both doubting and believing are needed frameworks for critical thinking. Defining thought in limited terms leaves little room for play or agreement in the pursuit of knowledge. By extension, it positions improv as a threat to the "serious" task of learning to write, rather than seeing it as a way of supporting writing pedagogy along with the efforts of those who teach it. Under these circumstances, improv cannot possibly be understood as serious or rigorous in nature and practice. While this kind of thinking does not describe all writing classrooms, students, teachers, and approaches, there exists the danger that using performance-based pedagogies in a college writing classroom may be critiqued as fun, frivolous, and worse, unimportant.

Leaving this common perception unchecked masks the complex work that improv and other performance-based approaches engender. In *Talking, Sketching, Moving,* Patricia Dunn points to a host of negative, published reactions to the use of multiple literacies in secondary and postsecondary teaching of writing. She argues that "multi-modal strategies are easily ridiculed" and "jokes [about them] work because they misrepresent and extremize multi-modal strategies, and they imply that these activities will completely take the place of written work" (151). In one example, she cites a cartoon from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that pokes fun at multimodal approaches. The cartoon, and its creator, suggest that doctoral students defend their dissertations through "interpretive dance" instead of writing (151). Dunn's analysis of reactions in the media and academia highlight unquestioned assumptions about writing and literacy. These assumptions also pertain to conversations in scholarship and classrooms about the place of improvisational acting. Dismissing improv as fun, easy-to-do, child's play ignores relevant connections to writing and invention. It fails to account for the intellectual, visual, spatial, and

215

kinesthetic processes that comprise improvisation, and limits the benefits students and teachers might gain from working in new, intellectually productive mediums. Group improvisation encourages students to pool together talents they might not typically be asked to use in a writing course, while at the same time engage with unfamiliar methods that might spark new conceptualizations. Students forge connections and associations between ideas they might not otherwise see and strengthen their ability to accept new perspectives into their thought processes. Before beginning to incorporate improv into a writing classroom, those invested in performance-based approaches need to examine unarticulated assumptions about play, writing, and literacy. Limited views of improv as fun and not "serious" need to be met with the understanding that performance techniques emphasize communication, community, audience awareness, and process knowledge in ways that contribute significantly to a writing classroom.

In addition to acknowledging underlying assumptions about the role of improv in a writing classroom, it is important to address how improv techniques and approaches will be incorporated into course materials and instruction. The design and adaptation of improv exercises can influence the extent to which students and teachers engage with play and take risks while letting go of making a mistake. Using improv to invent for a major writing assignment, I learned, may adversely affect how students experience and perceive the tenets and practices of improv. Through my research study, I noticed that I may have focused too closely on aligning improv exercises with the purposes of an assignment, and therefore inadvertently minimized students' ability and desire to play with ideas. The risk was too great. A "bad" idea could derail their progress in meeting the guidelines of the assignment, and possibly lead to a poor grade. Students were already working in a new context by engaging with improv and to have their

academic performance tied to this unfamiliar approach did not necessarily boost their confidence in trying out new ideas and freely making mistakes.

Since the time of my study, though, I have started to introduce students to improv in a more low-stakes environment, not directed by a major writing assignment, to give them a chance to invent for the sake of play, exploration, and creativity. In recent semesters, I have tried to present students with opportunities to work with improv for this reason and to expose them to non-print methods of communication. While a major writing assignment is not the main focus, I do make connections to writing and invention when using improv to help students make discoveries about how and why they communicate. For example, one improv exercise I use regularly in a low-stakes environment is the "Play Ball" exercise designed by Viola Spolin that I discuss in Chapter 1.[45] For this exercise, students stand and form two lines that face each other. With a partner, they take turns throwing an imaginary ball, mimicking the movements of throwing and catching a baseball, or basketball, or beach ball, for example. While watching from the sidelines, I call out a different ball type after students have spent some time throwing a specific kind. In addition to fostering play and creativity in their actions and decisions, I use this exercise to encourage students to visualize and embody different types of communication through visual, spatial, and kinesthetic intelligences. I try to draw students' attention to how they move their bodies when throwing each ball and how their partners react when catching it. Upon

---

[45] I would like to thank Valerie Lantz-Gefroh for helping me adapt this exercise, and others, for a classroom environment. Val is an actor, director, and instructor at Stony Brook University. She currently teaches in the Journalism Program and the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science. This center was designed with the help of Alan Alda, a professional actor and student of Viola Spolin, to use improv to help increase communication between scientists and the public. I have learned much from working with Val by taking her course, "Improv for Scientists." A major emphasis in her teaching is to help graduate students in science develop the ability to "build bridges of communication" so that they might more effectively convey their research and its value to a range of audiences. Val has greatly helped me see ways in which the techniques and philosophies of group improvisation enhance communication and teaching. Val has explained that the "Play Ball" exercise in particular is meant to help students understand that they "throw different balls of energy" when communicating in different mediums for different audiences.

reflection, I speak with students about how improvising each ball toss might represent how a writer communicates a message using a different type of communication, including different genres of writing. Tossing each ball, much like writing in a different genre, requires a different set of moves and decisions to convey meaning. The "Play Ball" exercise is meant to serve as a metaphor or visualization, which, as I discuss in Chapter 1, performance-based approaches can offer. One difference though is that here students are actually performing in the making of the visualization in addition to using the language of theater to discuss elements of written communication.

Moreover, the "Play Ball" exercise provides an opportunity to discuss with students the role of their partner, or audience, in this "volley" of communication. Students consider how communication might break down if the message or genre they send, represented by a particular ball, is not received in the way they intended. For example, we discuss the effects of throwing a beach ball while someone catches it with the imagined quickness and keen dexterity of catching a baseball. Students think back to watching beach balls sail slowly in the air before flopping to the ground, and point out discrepancies between their intentions and their partner's response. Reflecting on this experience usually raises important questions related to writing: What can writers do to ensure that the content and form of their message is received with the same intent used to send it? Lively conversations typically ensue.

Another improv exercise I use with students in a low-stakes environment is called "Press Conference." I have used this exercise to highlight connections to invention, communication, and writing and offer students practice with thinking on the sport and risk-taking. For this exercise, one student plays the role of a famous inventor speaking about her latest creation at a press conference; the twist is that this student does not know anything about her invention. She

218

must guess what it is based on the information she receives from fellow students, who know the invention's identity. These students act as journalists and ask guiding questions to help the inventor. While I have used this exercise as a lead-up to a literacy project that requires students to interview a skilled writer, I usually focus on helping them feel confident with being spontaneous, thinking on the spot, and taking creative risks in the kinds of questions they ask. My central goal, as with the ball-tossing exercise, is to provide them a chance to improvise ideas freely for an audience of their peers, while engaging with play. I often give students the explicit instruction to try anything, hoping that it will move them past the fear of making a mistake or "getting it wrong" so that they might benefit from thinking quickly and trust their ability to improvise. Students practice finding ways to connect with an audience, listen to each other, and adapt as a communicator, all valuable to writing and improvisation.

Designing exercises for a low-stakes environment can also help create moments of improv that more closely resemble a rehearsal or performance. In this context, students focus more of their attention on achieving the objectives set forth by the exercises, whether they be tossing an imaginary ball or asking a creative question, than inventing for a final product or assignment. One possible way of giving greater weight to the exercises is to set up a classroom like a performance space with a distinctive stage area and a section for students to act as audience members.[46] Part of my reasoning for this set-up is to give students practice performing in front of each other and experiencing the role the audience plays in guiding the actions and decisions of the performers. My hope is that students will witness what happens when an audience reacts positively to a "random" suggestion or idea with laughter. Students potentially

---

[46] I have created a performance area and an audience section specifically with the "Press-Conference" exercise so that students not acting as journalists can watch and enjoy as others try to help the inventor uncover her creation.

see opportunities emerge when ideas go "off track," something that happened less often in my research study. They watch as audience members influence the movement, action, and decision-making in an improvised scene as participants try to produce more laughter. Students also watch as those involved work off of each other's ideas. For example, in "Press Conference," students playing the role of journalists not only respond to the reactions of the audience, they also adapt their questioning based off of the answers they receive from the "inventor." If the "inventor's" answers reveal that she is far from discovering her invention, then they need to move in a new direction. Shifting students' attention from inventing for a distant audience, which was the focus of my research study, to an immediate one may encourage them to think of "randomness" as a helpful and productive facet of improv.

Another way of introducing students to the benefits of "random" ideas is to show them outtakes from television shows similar to *Parks and Recreation,* which I described earlier, with the intention of discussing the purpose of play in improv. The influx of improv comedy into mainstream media has created an opportunity for teachers and students to experience this kind of acting without having to attend a live show. Youtube and other web-based sources allow teachers to access clips of improvised scenes and backstage glimpses of how improv actors invent new material on the spot. Students can watch actors offer different responses to the same line of dialogue or sketch comedy writers develop a scene for a script by improvising ideas. Discussing with students what is happening in these outtakes, the kinds of behavior they observe, and the decision-making they notice may increase the possibility that students will begin to value acting spontaneously without a script. A related approach to watching outtakes is to ask students to practice improvising the last line of a script or piece of writing in class, which is similar to the sentence starters I used in my study with the "Rewind" exercise. That way students can

experience for themselves what they have watched improv actors do and practice producing new ideas in a form other than writing.

While students might see the benefits of improv more clearly in a low-stakes environment with the added benefit of viewing improvised performances, there still exists the highly authoritarian nature of a classroom, which may prevent students from fully playing with ideas. With a long-standing history of hierarchical social roles, expectations, and relationships, classroom spaces might not be the optimal location to replicate all aspects of an atmosphere that supports improv. There are classroom elements that resist making this space as potentially free and open as an improv rehearsal, which those committed to using this approach need to contend with: the assignment of grades, teacher expectations, student expectations, department learning objectives, classroom learning objectives, and others. Even if they are advised not to, students might still attempt to please the teacher by looking for the "right way" to complete an exercise or scene. Viola Spolin argues that this need for approval interferes with the freedom to play because it redirects attention and focus away from the immediate objectives of an improv exercise or scene: "Trying to be 'good' and avoiding 'bad' or being 'bad' because one can't be 'good' develops into a way of life for those needing approval/disapproval from authority- and the investigation and solving of problems becomes of secondary importance" (7).[47]

So why use improv? Integrating features of group improvisation into a writing classroom can still stimulate new processes of invention and transform students' willingness to engage with new ways of thinking. Many college-level writing programs make it a priority to provide students with these kinds of opportunities while helping to prepare them for future writing

---

[47] Although Spolin does not use the term student-centered pedagogy, she suggests that the work of improvisation be focused on the experiences of the student, while the teacher plays the role of side-coach, guiding, but not wholly directing, their actions. Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford have noted this area of Spolin's work, which is ripe for further research.

occasions in their professional lives. What if writing teachers could promote this experience by harnessing the benefits of improvisation? Students will likely need to engage in intellectual work that demands creativity and innovation in their future professions. They will also likely be asked to think on their feet, react quickly, improvise solutions to problems, and collaborate with others. Creating opportunities for students to engage in collaborative forms of invention might also raise their awareness of multiple perspectives as well as other social factors involved in writing. Students might think more deeply about audience and the communities of ideas, people, and perspectives surrounding a particular subject matter and rhetorical situation. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, improvisational acting can help restore a link to ancient rhetoric through its focus on community, which Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee argue has become de-emphasized in contemporary teaching of invention. After participating in improv, students in my research study made significant changes to their written drafts that reflect an increased awareness of audience and tone. They tried to anticipate their reader's reactions and expectations after experimenting with ideas with other students. This communally-driven knowledge base helped inform their thinking as they waded through new ideas and opinions that emerged and then later revised their written work.

Improv should not be treated as a panacea to address all writing needs. It may not work for all students all of the time. Writing involves a range of complex processes that include conceptualizing, organizing, and revising information. A one-size-fits all approach is not possible, or even desirable. Students create meaning using various formats and intelligences that exist outside of writing. Focusing too heavily on print-based approaches limits their opportunity to use these alternative strategies to augment what they currently do in a writing classroom. Improv-based writing pedagogies can offer students a way to bridge the demands of writing with

222

their strengths in other intellectual areas, while at the same time asking strong student writers to apply less familiar strategies that may help them generate new ideas. Bringing improv techniques and principles into a writing classroom opens the door to how students and teachers conceptualize invention and their use of what Paulo Freire described as "multiple channels of communication," which can help students learn important lessons about language, communication, and writing through visual, aural, and kinesthetic mediums. As a model for teaching, improv creates openings for multimodal projects that tap into the kind of techniques Freire and Augusto Boale used in their efforts to improve the lives of the illiterate. In the context of improvisation, students make sense of their experiences by speaking, listening, and moving with others. They pull from a collection of shared backgrounds and personal knowledge to connect ideas and form new perceptions. As a model for discovery, improv forces students and teachers outside of conventional modes of invention into collaborative, creative spaces that invite and support play and risk-taking. Improv motivates us to engage with new terrain in new situations that are unplanned, unrehearsed, and unpredictable. At its core, improvisation promotes a desire and a method for communicating and expressing oneself within an ensemble, built upon the imagination of multiple people, modalities, and abilities. It can broaden our thinking about finding ways to integrate new opportunities for discovery and thinking into writing classrooms. This dissertation represents one step in that direction. More needs to be done to explore how improv can enhance writing pedagogies.

Improv exists as more than a heuristic for invention and more than an art form. It is a point of view. It is a way of understanding and expressing all kinds of experiences that is not limited to the stage alone. It extends beyond the walls of any classroom, theater, or performance space, and can permeate any number of locations when those involved are committed to

223

community, creativity, and collaborative support. Improv performer and teacher Rob Kozlowski captures improv's pervasive influence and transformative capabilities when he writes, "Unique among theatre disciplines in existing more as a philosophy of how to live rather than a philosophy of how to act on stage, improvisational acting can transform a shy schoolboy into a comedy legend" (1). Offering participants of all types a "philosophy of how to live," improvisational acting can transform writing pedagogies by promoting acceptance, agreement, and the freedom to turn mistakes into opportunities for discovery.

Works Cited

Adam, James. *Conceptual Blockbusting.* 2nd Edition. Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 1974.

Adler, Tony. "Improvisational Theater." *Encyclopedia of Chicago.* Chicago Historical Society, n. d. Web. 11 July 2013. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/631.html>

Anderson, Daniel, Jackclyn Ngo, Sydney Stegall, and Kyle Stevens. "This is What We Did in Our Class." *CCC Online.* 1.1 (2012). Web. 25 July 2013.

Barndt, Deborah. "The World in a Tomato: Revising the Use of 'Codes' in Freire's Problem-Posing Education." *Convergence* 1 and 2 (1998): 62-73.

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 623-53.

Bawarshi, Anis. *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition.* Logan: Utah State UP, 2003.

-- "Sites of Invention: Genre and the Enactment of First-Year Writing." *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers.* Ed. Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 103-137.

Beaufort, Anne. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction.* Logan: Utah State UP, 2007.

Beech, Jennifer. "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness." *College English* 67.2 (2004): 172-186.

Belenky, Mary F., Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Berthoff, Ann E. *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers.* Monclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

Berlin, James. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 717-737.

Biesecker, Barbara. "Of Historicity, Rhetoric: The Archive as Scene for Invention." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9.1 (2006): 124-131.

Bizzell, Patricia. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 387-411.

Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 1992.

-- *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1979.

Bolton, Gavin. "Forword." *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected Writings on Education and Drama*. Eds. Liz Johnson and Cecily O'Neill. London: Hutchinson, 1984. 7-8.

Bridwell-Bowles, Lillian. "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy." *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric*. Ed. Janet Emig and Louise Wetherbee Phelps. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995. 43-66.

Clark, Irene. "Process." *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*. Ed. Irene Clark. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003. 1-29.

Clark, Irene and Ronald Fischbach. "Writing and Learning in the Health Sciences: Rhetoric, Identity, Genre, and Performance." *WAC Journal* 19 (2008): 15-28.

Cohen, Adar. "From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writers." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 27.2 (2002): 6-8. Web. 12 Nov. 2010.

Colbert, Stephen. Northwestern University. June 17 2011. Commencement Address.

Cooper, Marilyn. "The Ecology of Writing." *College English* 48.4 (1986): 364-75.

Corkery, Caleb. "Rhetoric of Race: Critical Pedagogy without Resistance." *TETYC* 36.3 (2009): 244-256.

Creel, Gil, Michael Kuhne, and Maddy Riggle. "See the Boal, Be the Boal: Theatre of the Oppressed and Composition Courses." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 28.2 (2000): 141-156.

Crowley, Sharon. *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current Traditional Rhetoric*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

-- "Teaching Invention." *Strategies for Teaching First- Year Composition*. Eds. Duane Roen, Veronica Pantoja, Lauren Yena, Susan K. Miller, and Eric Waggoner. Urbana: NCTE, 2009. 231-234.

Crowley, Sharon and Deborah Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. New York: Pearson, 2009.

Daumer, Elizabeth, and Sandra Runzo. "Transforming the Composition Classroom" *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity.* Ed. Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987. 45-62.

Devitt, Amy, Mary Jo Reiff, and Anis Bawarshi. *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres.* New York: Pearson, 2004.

DiPirro, Kevin. "Devising/Revising Student-Centered Pedagogy." *CCC Online.* 1.1 (2012). January 2012. Web. 25 July 2013.

Downs, Douglas and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re) Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *CCC* 58.4 (2007): 552-585.

Duffelmeyer, Barbara. "Critical Work in First-Year Composition: Computers, Pedagogy, and Research." *Pedagogy* 2.3 (2002): 357-374.

Dunn, Patricia. *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

Ede, Lisa, and Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford. "Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13.4 (1995): 401-441.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* 2nd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

-- "The Believing Game or Methodological Believing." *Journal for The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 14 (2009): 1-11.

-- "Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—an into the Classroom." *College English* 67.4 (2005): 388-89.

-- "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing.* Ed. Irene Clark. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003. 161-81.

Emig, Janet. "The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders: Chapter 4 Lynn: Profile of a Twelfth-Grade Writer." *The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning, and Thinking.* Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1983. 63-96.

Enoch, Jessica. "Becoming Symbol-Wise: Kenneth Burke's Pedagogy of Critical Reflection." *CCC* 56.2 (2004): 272-296.

Esposito, Lauren. "Where to Begin? Using Place-Based Writing to Connect Students with Their Local Communities." *English Journal* 101.4 (2012): 70-76.

Faigley, Lester. *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.

Fey, Tina. *Bossypants.* New York: Little Brown, 2011.

Fishman, Jenn. "Editor's Introduction." *CCC Online* 1.1 (2012). Web. 3 January 2013.

Fishman, Jenn and Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye. "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy." *CCC* 57.2 (2005): 224-252.

Flannery, Kathryn. "Performance and the Limits of Writing." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 16.1 (1999): 43-73.

Flower, Linda, and John Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 273-297.

Flynn, Elizabeth A. "Composing as a Woman." *CCC* 39.4 (1988): 423-435.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1989.

-- *Education for Critical Consciousness.* New York: Continuum, 1974.

Freire, Paulo and Donaldo Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World.* London: Routledge, 1987.

"Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: Teaching Writing by Fostering Essential Habits of Mind." 2011. Web. 25 March 2013. <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/ Resources/Positions/Framework%20one-pager_4-2011.pdf>.

Fulkerson, Richard. "Of Pre- and Post Process: Reviews and Ruminations." *Composition Studies* 29.2 (2001): 93-119.

Gardner, Howard. "Multiple Intelligences as a Catalyst." *English Journal* 84.8 (1995): 16-18.

Gee, James Paul. "What is Literacy?" *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers.* Ed. Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 29-39.

Halpern, Charna. *Art by Committee: A Guide to Advanced Improvisation.* Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2006.

Halpern, Charna, Del Close, Kim "Howard" Johnson. *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation.* Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1994.

Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Heathcote, Dorothy. "Drama as a Process for Change." *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected Writings on Education and Drama.* Ed. Liz Johnson and Cecily O'Neill. London: Hutchinson, 1984. 114-125.

Johnstone, Keith. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre.* London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1979.

Keller, Daniel. "Thinking Rhetorically." *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers.* Ed. Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Tayakoshi. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008. 49-63.

Kirkland, David. "Rewriting School: Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 21.1 (2004): 83-96.

Knobel, Michele and Colin Lankshear. New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning. Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2006.

Kozlowski, Rob. *The Art of Chicago Improv: Shortcuts to Long-Form Improvisation.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

Kress, Gunther. "Multimodality." Ed. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures.* New York: Routledge, 2000. 182-202.

Lauer, Janice M. *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition.* West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press LLC, 2004. PDF.

-- "Rhetorical Invention: The Diaspora." *Perspectives on Rhetorical Invention.* Eds. Janet Atwill and Janice Lauer. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. 1-15.

LeFevre, Karen Burke. *Invention As a Social Act*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986.

Lenig, Stuart. "Using Drama to Teach Composition." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 19.4 (1992): 305-12.

Lindemann, Erika. *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers.* 4th Edition. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.

LoMonico, Michael. "Close Reading on Your Feet: Performance in the English Language Arts Classroom." *English Journal* 95.1 (2005): 116-119. Print.

Love, Meredith. "Composing Through the Performative Screen: Translating Performance Studies into Writing Pedagogy." *Composition Studies* 35.2 (2007): 11-30.

McLaren, Peter. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. London: Routledge, 1986.

Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983.

Murray, Donald. "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *The Essential Don Murray: Lessons from America's Greatest Writing Teacher*. Ed. Thomas Newkirk and Lisa. C. Miller. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009. 1-5.

Napier, Mick. *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.

New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." Eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 9-37.

Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997.

-- *Nuts and Bolts: A Practical Guide to Teaching College Composition,* Boynton: New York, 1993.

Odell, Lee. "'Yes, a T-Shirt!': Assessing Visual Composition in the 'Writing' Class." *CCC* 61.1 (2009): 197-216.

O'Heir, Jim. "Parks and Recreation Improvised Lines." *The Paley Center for Media. Youtube.* Youtube, 24 Sept. 2012. Web. 15 July 2014.

O'Neill, Cecily. "Drama in Education." *Structure and Spontaneity: The Process Drama of Cecily O'Neill.* Ed. Philip Taylor and Christine D. Warner. Trent: Trentham Books, 2006. 31-39.

--- "Transforming Texts: Intelligences in Action." *Structure and Spontaneity: The Process Drama of Cecily O'Neill.* Ed. Philip Taylor and Christine D. Warner. Trent: Trentham Books, 2006. 91-100.

Pineau, Elyse, Lamm. "Teaching is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor." *American Educational Research Journal* 31.1 (1994): 3-25.

Porter, James. *Audience and Rhetoric: An Archaeological Composition of the Discourse Community.* New York: Prentice Hall, 1991.

Reichert, Amy. "Using Multiple Intelligences to Create Better (Teachers of) Writers: A Guide to MI Theory for the Composition Teacher." *TETYC* 32.2 (2004): 166-173.

Ressler, Paula. *Dramatic Changes: Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with High School Students Through Drama.* New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2002.

Ryan, Kathleen. "Memory, Literacy, and Invention: Reimagining the Canon of Memory for the Writing Classroom." *Composition Studies* 32.1 (2004): 35-47.

Rose, Mike. "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block." *CCC* 31.4 (1980): 389-401.

Salibrici, Mary. "Role-Playing as a Writing-to-Learn Activity." *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Ed. Duane Roen, Veronica Pantoja, Lauren Yena, Susan K. Miller, and Eric Waggoner. Urbana: NCTE, 2009. 171-176.

Sawyer, R. Keith. *Creative Conversations: Improvisation in Everyday Discourse.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2001.

---   "Improvised Lessons: Collaborative Discussion in the Constructivist Classroom." *Teaching Education* 15.2 (2004): 189-201.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Schutzman, Mady and Jan Cohen-Cruz. "Introduction." *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics.* Ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 2006. 1-9.

Seham, Amy. *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Selfe, Cynthia. "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention." *CCC* 50 (1999): 411-36.

Selfe, Cynthia and Pamela Tayakoshi. "Thinking about Multimodality." *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*. Ed. Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Tayakoshi. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008. 1-12.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teaching of Basic Writing.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Shipka, Jody. "Negotiating Rhetorical, Material, Methodological, and Technological Difference: Evaluating Multimodal Design." *CCC* 61.1 (2009): 343-366.

--   "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing." *CCC* 57 (2005): 277-306.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 43-54.

Spoel, Philippa. "Re-inventing Rhetorical Epistemology: Donna Haraway's and Nicole Brossard's Embodied Visions." *The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of*

Rhetoric. Ed. Christine Mason Sutherland and Rebecca Sutcliffe. Alberta, Canada:
University of Calgary Press, 1999. 199-212.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing
Techniques.* 2nd Edition. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983.

Steineke, Nancy. *Assessment Live! 10 Real-time Ways for Kids to Show What They Know—and
Meet the Standards.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009.

Steitzer, Caitlin. "The Brilliant Genius: Using Improv Comedy in Social Work Groups." *Social
Work with Groups* 34 (2011): 270-282.

Tobin, Lad. "Process Pedagogy." *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies.* Ed. Gary Tate, Amy
Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 1-18.

Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play.* New York:
Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.

Vandenberg, Peter. "Taming Multiculturalism: The Will to Literacy in Composition Studies."
Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers. Ed. Peter
Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 535-562.

Vandenberg, Peter, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. "Critical Introduction." *Relations,
Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers.* Ed. Peter Vandenberg,
Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 1-20.

Villanueva, Victor. "The Givens in Our Conversations: The Writing Process." *Cross-Talk in
Comp Theory: A Reader.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003. 1-
2.

"Viola Spolin." *Viola Spolin: Spontaneity Awareness Transformation.* Intuitive Learning
Systems, n. d. Web. 2 January 2013. <http://www.spolin.com/violabio/>

Wheeler, Susan. "Exercises for Discovery, Experiment, Skills, and Play." *Nuts and Bolts: A
Practical Guide to Teaching College Composition.* Ed. Thomas Newkirk. Boynton: New
York, 1993.

Whose Line is it Anyway. Dir. Ron de Moraes. Writ. Dan Patterson and Mark Leveson. *ABC
Family.* Television. *Youtube.* 8 Oct. 2010. Web. 23 July 2014.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey. *"You Gotta BE the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with
Adolescents.* 2nd Edition. New York: Teachers College Press, 2008.

Yagelski, Robert. "Who's Afraid of Subjectivity? The Composing Process and Postmodernism,
or, A Student of Donald Murray Enters the Age of Postmodernism." *Taking Stock:*

Reassessing The Writing Process Movement in the 90s. Ed. Thomas Newkirk and Lad
Tobin. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. 203-215.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.

--   "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *CCC* 56 (2004): 297-328.

Zanitsch, Jason. "Playing in the Margins: Process Drama as a Prereading Strategy with LGBT
YA Literature." *English Journal* 98.4 (2009): 85-91.

Appendix A: IRB-Approved Protocol

Protocol Template Guidance
For Submissions to CORIHS

TITLE: Using Performance-Based Approaches to Teach Writing

INVESTIGATORS: Patricia Dunn, Doctor of Arts. (PI), Lauren Esposito (Graduate Student Investigator)

A. SPECIFIC AIMS: To determine the effects of performance-based approaches on students' writing in a first-year composition course; to investigate students' reactions to these approaches; and to determine how these approaches might improve students' abilities to communicate, generate material for writing, and write print-based products.

B. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE: Current writing pedagogies do not fully incorporate performance-based approaches. Most often teachers of writing employ print-based strategies, including written outlines, lists, or informal writing called freewriting, as an instructional method. More specifically, these strategies tend to dominate how teachers approach prewriting or invention, a process whereby students examine and generate material for argumentative writing (oftentimes the term brainstorming is used interchangeably with invention). Performance-based approaches, on the other hand, incorporate practices and techniques that are not solely print-based and are familiar to professional acting and theater, like improvisation, role-play, and exercises in character-building and scene development. Performing in the classroom offers students a valuable opportunity to invent and prewrite using visual, aural, and kinesthetic approaches to writing. It can be used as a highly participatory heuristic that encourages students to explore different sides to an argument or writing situation, thereby broadening their perspective and improving their ability to invent through dialogue and collaboration. Much of what has been written recently about the teaching of writing supports the use of performance practices and techniques as an alternative to print strategies; however, there is little published evidence to suggest that these practices are actually being integrated into the classroom. There is a fundamental gap between scholarship and practice in this area that needs to be explored further through research. Performance-based approaches have the potential to help students explore different perspectives, opinions, ideas, and concepts that influence their writing. By analyzing students' writing and their responses, I hope to research the effects of performance-based approaches and, depending on the results, suggest ways of incorporating performance into the teaching of writing and decrease this perceived gap.

C. PRELIMINARY STUDIES: None

D. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

1. Rationale/overview:

Performance-based approaches add significantly to ongoing conversations in Composition Studies about the importance of multimodal composition and multiple literacies to

234

teaching writing. Scholars have argued that multiple modes of communicating and expressing ideas, including visual images, sounds, and movement, need to be integrated into writing pedagogies. That way students are not limited by print alone and benefit from using various methods of representing thought and meaning. These methods tap into multiple intelligences, including linguistic, spatial, and kinesthetic abilities, and present new insights that can help students develop as writers, specifically their ability to generate ideas. Performance provides such a multimodal method and offers students a chance to discover and explore material for writing through dialogue, role-play, and movement. Students interact and collaborate by participating in theater exercises that lead to discovery and exploration, two key elements of prewriting or invention. I (Lauren Esposito) intend to use these exercises as, what is known in rhetorical theory, an "invention strategy" (or a way to generate ideas and evidence), in order to help students produce print texts that are typically assigned in a first-year composition course, such as a persuasive letter. As an invention heuristic, performance can help students generate, organize, and revise writing, and can motivate new developments in their thinking about different sides to an argument or writing situation. It serves as a valuable approach to the teaching of writing that is often overlooked or not fully explored. The field then is ripe for research that examines how performance-based approaches can be used to improve students' writing.

The overall purpose of this research is to study the effects of performance exercises in a first-year composition course. More specifically, I intend to study the effects of using these exercises as an invention strategy to assist students as they complete a writing assignment. This study will take the form of qualitative research and the performance exercises will serve as the treatment. I intend to examine samples of student writing as well as student feedback through the following: (1) a qualitative comparison of two drafts of the same writing assignment, one written before the treatment, and one written afterwards; (2) an analysis of students' written reflections on the experience of participating in the treatment, to be completed after the exercises; (3) interviews with student participants to be conducted after the treatment; and (4) two surveys to be completed by student participants after the treatment. The first survey will be conducted after students complete the second draft of the writing assignment. It will focus on how students typically approach invention, or brainstorming, and how the performance exercises affected their writing of this particular assignment. The second survey will also be conducted after the second draft, but at a later point in the semester. It will focus more broadly on students' responses to the treatment and ask questions regarding writing concerns in general, not necessarily those pertaining to the writing assignment in the research study.

I expect to gather information about the effects of the treatment on students' writing and the extent to which the treatment helped students improve their ability to generate material for writing and broaden their perspective on a writing topic. I hope to provide scholars and teachers of writing with examples of how they might incorporate performance exercises into writing pedagogies. Additionally, I hope to decrease the existing gap in scholarship between theoretical understandings of performance and its actual use in the classroom. I intend to use the research findings in my dissertation work, possible publications in the future, and presentations at academic conferences.

2. Research Site: Stony Brook University, West Campus

3. Study sample: Stony Brook University undergraduate students enrolled in my section of WRT 102 (the second course in the university's writing requirement) will be recruited at the start of the fall 2012 semester. A presentation about the research will be given at the start of the course to explain the research study and ask students to volunteer. There will be no other recruitment materials used. Students taking this course are typically freshman students; however, there is the possibility that upper-level students will be taking it to fulfill the university's writing requirement for graduation. There will be approximately 25 students registered for the course. Students that decide not to participate in the research study will not face a penalty nor have their grades negatively affected.

4. Screening: Participants must be 18 years old or older, an undergraduate student at Stony Brook University, and enrolled in my section of WRT 102.

5. Procedures: At the start of the fall 2012 semester, I (Lauren Esposito) will ask students in my WRT 102 course to volunteer to participate as subjects in the research study. As part of the regular course curriculum, all students will participate in the treatment of performance exercises and complete the writing assignment (a persuasive letter). There will be no formal control group. In this study, the student subjects function as their own control group because their writing will receive qualitative assessment both before and after the treatment of performance exercises. It is understood that only those students that have consented to the research study will complete the surveys, participate in the interview, and have their writing and feedback included in the research data. Participants' names will be removed from their written drafts and the surveys will be anonymous. Participants will complete the surveys and interviews outside of class time. It is also understood that students have the option to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences and that they need not participate in all aspects of the research design to contribute to the study.

Before writing their first draft of the writing assignment, all students will use print-based strategies in class to generate material for the assignment. These strategies will likely include a written outline, informal writing called freewriting, or writing a list of ideas as a form of brainstorming. Then, they will write their first draft outside of class, which will be evaluated based on a rubric designed specifically for this assignment (a copy of the rubric and assignment are included in this proposal). After finishing the first draft, students will then participate in the performance exercises during class time. I intend to introduce, explain, and facilitate the performance exercises. Once the exercises are completed, students will write a short reflection in class on the experience of participating in the exercises. There will also be in-class discussion of this experience, during which time students will have an opportunity to express how the exercises influenced their thinking and writing about the assignment.

As part of the course curriculum, all students may have their participation in the treatment video-taped. This video footage will be used for classroom purposes so that students can analyze and review their performing of the exercises for information related to the writing assignment. It is understood that only those students that have consented to the research study will have their video footage included in the research data. This select footage will be used in my dissertation, may be used in future publications, and may be shown at academic conferences to demonstrate the effects of the treatment. Students in the video footage will not be identified by name. The footage will be stored on a university computer in the English Department in a

locked office. Access to the computer is protected by a username and password. Dr. Patricia Dunn (PI) and I will be the only people with access to these files.

   After participating in the performance exercises, students will write a second draft of the same writing assignment outside of class. This second draft will also be evaluated using the same rubric, and comparisons between drafts will be made based on the criteria outlined in the rubric. At this point, students in the research study will complete the first survey (a copy of each survey is included in this proposal). Students will complete the second survey at a later point in the semester.

   I intend to conduct and audio-tape individual interviews with student subjects outside of class (a copy of the interview questions is included in this proposal; I may ask follow-up questions based on students' responses to the interview questions). The audio files and transcripts of the interviews will be used in my dissertation, may be used in future publications, and may be presented at academic conferences to illustrate students' responses. The audio files and transcripts will also be stored on the same university computer in the English Department in a locked office. Access to the computer is protected by a username and password. Dr. Patricia Dunn (PI) and I will be the only people with access to these files. The audio files, transcripts, video footage, and students' written work will be used to analyze the effects of the treatment. The research data will be stored and archived after the class is over and kept for 10 years to refer back to, during which time the data will be secured in a locked office and be password protected.

E. STATISTICS: N/A

F. FUNDING STATUS, DETAILS: NO FUNDING

G. HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH PROTECTION FROM RISK

Risk to Subjects: Minimal

Adequacy of Protection Against Risks

Potential Benefits of Proposed Research to the Subjects and Others: As a result of the teaching strategies used in this study, the student subjects themselves might benefit from the following: (1) discovering a new and more effective strategy for brainstorming ideas and generating material for writing situations; (2) discovering a new and more effective strategy for exploring different perspectives, opinions, ideas, and concepts that influence their writing; (3) improving their writing by examining different sides of an argument or writing situation, and by broadening their perspective on a writing topic; and (4) improving their ability to write and communicate persuasively. In addition, by publishing the research data, teachers of writing might benefit by learning about the effects of using performance exercises as an invention strategy in the classroom.

Importance of the Knowledge to be Gained: A better understanding of the effects of performance exercises on students' writing will motivate further research in Composition Studies. It will help illustrate ways of incorporating non-print invention strategies into the teaching of writing, which support multiple literacies and multiple intelligences.

H. DATA SAFETY MONITORING PLAN (for more than minimal risk studies): N/A

I. LITERATURE CITED

Alexander, Bryant. "Intimate Engagement: Student Performances as Scholarly Endeavor." *Theatre Topics* 12.1 (2002): 85-98. Print.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1957.

Cohen, Adar. "From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writers." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 27.2 (2002). Web. 12 Nov. 2010.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. New York: Routledge, 2004. 311–22.

Crowley, Sharon and Deborah Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. New York: Pearson, 2009. Print.

Dolan, Jill. *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001.

Dorn, Sherman. Response. "Teacher-Centered vs. Student-Centered Pedagogy." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 18 Sep. 2010. Web. 19 Sep. 2010.

Dunn, Patricia. *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*. New Hampshire. Heinemann, 2001. Print.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.

Fishman, Jenn and Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye. "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 57.2 (2005): 224-252. Print.

Goldbery, Andy. *Improv Comedy*. New York: Samuel French, 1991. Print.

Hamara,Judith (ed). "Introduction." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*. Sage Publications, 2006: 12-21. Print.

Halpern, Charna, Del Close, Kim "Howard" Johnson. *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1994. Print.

Heddon, Deirdre and Milling, Jane. *Devising Performance: A Critical History: Theatre and Performance Practices*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.

LeFevre, Karen Burke. *Invention As a Social Act*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986. Print.

Liew, Warren Mark. "Teaching and Performance: A Study in Two Acts." Diss. Stanford University, 2010. Stanford Digital Repository. n.d. Web. 12 Jun. 2011.

Lindemann, Erika. *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. 4th Ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.

Lunsford, Andrea A. "'Authority' in the Writing Classroom." *Writing Matters*. University of Georgia Press, 2007: 35-53. Print.

Manis, Shelley. "Writing as Performance: Using Performance Theory to Teach Writing in Theatre Classrooms." *Theatre Topics* 19.20 (2009): 139-151. Print.

McLaren, Peter. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. London: Routledge, 1986.

Oddey, Alison. *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Pineau, Elyse, Lamm. "Teaching is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor." *American Educational Research Journal* 31.1 (1994): 3-25. Print.

Sawyer, R. Keith. "Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation." *Educational Researcher* 33.2 (2004): 12-20. Print.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. 2nd Ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983. Print.

Stucky, Nathan, and Cynthia Wimmer. *Teaching Performance Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.

Sorcinelli, Mary Deane, and Peter Elbow. *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing across the Disciplines: New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Appendix B: IRB-Approved Assignment

Title: Using Performance-Based Approaches to Teach Writing
Investigators: Patricia Dunn, Doctor of Arts. (PI), Lauren Esposito (Graduate Student Investigator)

Writing Assignment: Researched-Based Letter

Assignment Description:

For this assignment, students will be composing research-based letters that address a social, environmental, or political issue affecting a local community. The goal of the assignment is for students to write to a specific individual or group invested in the community, and convince this audience to take action that would better the lives of community members. Using researched information, students compose a persuasive letter that might be addressed to a political figure, social organization, business leader, or other person or group with the authority and ability to effect social change. In their persuasive letter, students: (1) explain the reasons why this issue needs to be addressed; and (2) identify the actions the audience should take to resolve the problem or issue. Students work to raise awareness of the issue and motivate a positive outcome. For example, students may write to a local government official about the need for recycling and other environmentally-conscious practices in a nearby neighborhood.

Appendix C: IRB-Approved Rubric

<u>Title</u>: Using Performance-Based Approaches to Teach Writing
<u>Investigators</u>: Patricia Dunn, Doctor of Arts. (PI), Lauren Esposito (Graduate Student Investigator)

<u>Evaluation Rubric for the Writing Assignment (Research-Based Letter)48</u>

Scoring Criteria	Level 4- Excellent	Level 3- Good	Level 2- Weak	Level 1- Poor
Audience Awareness	Demonstrates a strong understanding of the specific audience and anticipates what the audience may already know. Provides new information that is appropriate for the audience.	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the specific audience and provides new information that is somewhat appropriate for the audience.	Demonstrates little understanding of the specific audience and summarizes information the audience already knows.	It is not clear who the specific audience of the letter is and what this audience may already know.
Position/ Stance	Effectively communicates a specific position or stance on the issue raised.	Communicates a position or stance on the issue raised that is slightly broad in focus.	Struggles to communicate a position or stance on the issue raised that is too broad and general for the focus of the letter.	The writer's position on the issue raised is not clearly understood.
Reasons that support the writer's position	Provides and explains highly relevant and convincing reasons that support the writer's position and are appropriate for the audience.	Provides and explains relevant and convincing reasons that support the writer's position and are relatively appropriate for the audience.	Provides few reasons overall and these reasons aren't very relevant, convincing, or appropriate for the audience, and don't support the writer's position.	The reasons provided aren't relevant, convincing, or appropriate. They are confusing and prevent the audience from understanding the writer's position.

---

48 Rubric adapted from NCTE's Read Write Think Lesson "Communicating on Local Issues: Exploring Audience in Persuasive Letter Writing" by Missy Nieveen Phegley

Anticipated Counter-arguments	The writer effectively anticipates possible arguments, bias, and counterarguments expressed by the audience.	The writer somewhat anticipates possible arguments, bias, and counterarguments expressed by the audience.	The writer hints at anticipating possible arguments, bias, and counterarguments expressed by the audience.	The writer doesn't at all consider possible arguments, bias, or counterarguments expressed by the audience.
Facts and Examples	Includes researched facts and examples that are specific, relevant, and explained to enhance and develop the writer's position.	Includes some researched facts and examples that are somewhat specific, relevant, and explained to develop the writer's position.	Includes only a few researched facts and examples that are not always specific, relevant, or explained. These facts and examples don't always develop the writer's position.	Includes researched facts and examples that are not relevant or explained, and confuse the reader while taking away from the strength of the writer's position.
Organization and Arrangement	Effectively uses transitions to effectively guide and persuade the audience from one idea or reason to the next. Arranges information in a way that is easy to follow and understand.	Uses transitions to guide and persuade the audience from one idea or reason to the next. Arranges information in a way that is somewhat easy to follow and understand.	Uses some transitions to guide the audience. Arranges information in a way that is distracting and somewhat confusing.	Does not use transitions or any other markers to guide the audience, making the letter distracting and hard to understand.
Genre	Demonstrates a strong understanding of the elements of the genre being used, including knowledge of conventions, language, and structure.	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the elements of the genre being used, including knowledge of conventions, language, and structure.	Demonstrates little understanding of the elements of the genre being used; at times the writer relies on other genres that are not appropriate for the writing situation.	The writer does not understand the elements of the genre being used and uses another genre(s) that is not appropriate for the writing situation.
Design and format	Effectively meets all of the design and format requirements for a business letter.	Meets almost all of the design and format requirements for a business letter.	Meets a few of the design and format requirements for a business letter.	Barely resembles the design and format of a business letter.

Total Score=   _____

Appendix D: IRB-Approved Interview Questions

<u>Student Interview Questions:</u>

1. How do you usually approach a writing assignment for class? What do you do to get started? Describe your writing process as best you can.
2. Do you think that brainstorming makes a difference in your writing? In other words, do you find it useful or necessary? If so, why?
3. How does your approach change as you write for different situations (different classes and/or situations outside of school, like work for example)?
4. What kinds of strategies do you typically use to brainstorm and express your ideas?
5. How do these strategies help or hinder your process? Do these strategies vary at all depending on the writing situation or the writing task?
6. Do you typically rely on print-based strategies? Do you ever find yourself using non-print strategies, like pictures or other images, to brainstorm and express ideas? If so, how are these strategies different from or similar to what you're able to accomplish using print?
7. Do you ever talk to people about what you're writing? If so, who do you usually talk to and what are you looking to get out of this interaction?
8. Do you typically work alone when brainstorming ideas or do you find it helpful to work with other people either in small groups or in a one-to-one setting? What's your experience working with other people in this type of setting?
9. When collaborating with other people on a writing assignment, do you find that a lot of your ideas come from listening to other people and sharing ideas?
10. What was it like to participate in the performance-based exercises? Have you done anything like this before in college, high school, or another setting? If so, what was that like?
11. How did you handle working with other people to complete the exercises? What were some challenges or advantages to working with other people?
12. How did you feel about getting up in front of other people? Were you nervous, anxious, or excited? How did this affect your ability to participate in the exercises?
13. Did you find it easy to trust and accept the contributions of other people during the exercises? Why or why not?
14. How did you feel about being spontaneous and not having your responses to the exercises pre-planned or written down ahead of time?
15. Did this aspect motivate you to think, act, or write in a different way? If so, how?
16. How did these exercises, if at all, influence your ability to brainstorm and express ideas?
17. Were there any specific exercises you found more helpful? If so, which ones and why?
18. How was using your body and voice to express your ideas different from using a pen and paper or a computer?
19. What was it like to act as another person during the role-play?
20. Please describe your experience taking on this person's perspective and speaking from his or her point of view during the exercises.
21. What changes, if any, did you notice in your writing or your thinking about writing after participating in the exercises?
22. What insights, if any, did you gain about the topic you wrote about or about yourself as a writer from participating in these exercises?

Peer Response for Research-based Letter[49]

Directions: Today's peer response session is going to involve an exercise called "Rewind." In this exercise, two partners work together and engage in a dialogue, which is interrupted at certain points when Partner #2 says "Rewind." When the dialogue is interrupted, Partner #1 must repeat the last sentence he or she said, but change the ending of this sentence so that a new idea is introduced. Here is an example:

Partner #1: I'm going shopping this weekend to buy a **scarf.**
Partner #2: Rewind
Partner #1: I'm going shopping this weekend to buy a **sweater.**
Partner #2: Rewind
Partner #1: I'm going shopping this weekend to buy a **pair of jeans.**

This exercise is designed to help each person explore their topic by generating new ideas and new ways of revising his or her letter to strengthen it.

Getting Started: Listen and read along as Partner #1 reads his or her letter aloud. This will give you an opportunity to learn about the topic and get a sense of the stance Partner #1 is taking on this topic. As you listen and read along, underline sentences in your partner's letter that tell you what he or she is arguing and the reasons he or she uses to make this argument. Then use the questions below.

Questions to ask Partner #1:

1. Why are you interested in this topic?

Partner#1:   I am interested in this topic because...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I am interested in this topic because...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner#1:   I am interested in this topic because...........

2. How else might you start your letter? (Think about ways to use the introduction to grab the reader's attention and make him or her pay attention to the topic.)

Partner #1: I could start my letter by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could start my letter by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could start my letter by...........

---

[49] I used this handout with students during the "Rewind" exercise.

3. Choose one of the sentences you underlined in Partner #1's letter that has to do with a reason Partner #1 gives. Ask Partner #1 to read this sentence aloud and then change the last portion of the sentence each time. (Here is example of how this might go:)

Partner #1: <u>The community park provides</u> a safe place for children to play.

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: <u>The community park provides</u> a place for people to exercise outdoors.

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: <u>The community park provides</u> a location for events and festivals.

4. Choose a second sentence and **repeat Step #3.**

5. With Partner #1's help, locate a paragraph in Partner #1's letter that might need further development or explanation. This paragraph might mention a reason and not explain why it's important. Or this paragraph might contain some confusing sentences. Ask Partner #1, What are ways you could develop this paragraph?

Partner #1: I could develop this paragraph by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could develop this paragraph by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could develop this paragraph by...........

6. Locate a research source in Partner#1's letter. Ask Partner #1: What is the purpose of this research source in your letter? (In other words, you're trying to find out how and why Partner #1 is using this research source.)

Partner #1: The purpose of this research source is...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: The purpose of this research source is...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: The purpose of this research source is...........

7. How else might you end your letter? (Think about ways to use the conclusion to make sure the reader not only pays attention to the topic, but is motivated to make a change happen.)

Partner #1: I could end my letter by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could end my letter by...........

Partner #2: Rewind

Partner #1: I could end my letter by..........

Appendix F: Word Count Table of Students' Letter Drafts[50]

Student (all students' names have been changed)	Number of Words in the Before Draft	Number of Words in the After Draft
Edward	969	923
Brian	664	770
Matt	1,017	1,135
Michael	727	734
Nate	1,251	1,683
Jacob	1,088	1,173
Mei	897	1,188
Jin	823	930
Ashley	885	1,033
Margaret	832	942
Sarah	633	1,322
Nicole	971	1,494
Kim	1,112	1,168
Ahmed	939	1,365
Nick	797	912
Total	13,605	16,772

---

[50] In the word count of students' letter drafts, I included the heading, salutation, and all paragraphs.