

Portal to the Public (PoP) Training for Teen Science Café Scientists

Go with the Flow (Improv)

Developer: Katey Ahmann, Stacey Forsyth, Michelle Hall, Kathryn Penzkover

Category: Facilitation

Approximate Length: 45-60 min.

Format: In-person workshop

Revised Aug. 8, 2016

Main Idea:

This session uses common improv techniques to strengthen scientists' skills as café speakers. Through a series of pair and group improv activities and games, scientists practice the following strategies:

- Listen to the audience!
- Respond to the audience's questions and interests.
- Agree (with the interests of your audience); be flexible if the audience shifts the conversation in a different direction than what you may have planned.
- Don't try to be the star! Focus on supporting the conversation in order to engage the group, rather than being the star expert in the room.
- Have fun! (One of the most important rules in both improv and science cafes.)

In addition, scientists have an opportunity to engage in impromptu conversations – in a fun, informal and supportive setting – in which they are required to think fast, be quick on their feet, and may find themselves in uncomfortable situations when they are having a hard time composing an answer.

Relevant Objectives:

- Develop scientists' skills of listening and responding to their audience in a way that recognizes and respects the audience.
- Improve scientists' ability to talk about controversial topics effectively and respectfully.

- Improve scientists' awareness of the importance of wait time, and allowing their audience to process information before moving on.
- Emphasize the importance of flexibility and adaptability in science cafes.

How this Relates to other PD Elements:

The Improv PD element is facilitated at the end of the training workshop, following at least two other group activities, in order to provide scientists with some time to get familiar with their colleagues. The improv workshop connects well to Learning Through Play and Storyweaving and an experienced facilitator may elect to integrate the improv-based activities with these other elements.

Assumed prior knowledge and experience:

This PD element assumes that scientists are interested in honing their presentation skills, but does not require any prior theater or improv experience.

Room Set-Up and Materials Preparation:

This activity requires very little in terms of room set-up and preparation. Given the active, dynamic nature of these exercises, it may be helpful to conduct this workshop in a large open room, in which tables and chairs have been moved out of the way.

Process:

Have you ever been having a conversation with someone and thought about (or even composed) your response to them before they finished their thought? In this workshop, we're going to participate in a series of exercises to help us stay in the moment and listen to our audience, in order to facilitate an interesting and dynamic conversation.

First, Explain the Rules of Improv:

1. **Listen** – Always listen to what has been said. It will help you.
2. **Agree** – Accept and support everything as right. Don't deny. "Yes" is always better than "no" or "yes, but". Never deny a verbal or physical reality.
3. **There are no mistakes** – Don't worry about doing it "right" or about being funny. There is no "right" way. In fact, often our mistakes are what brings humor.

4. **Don't worry about yourself** – Put your attention on making everyone else look good. You'll look good when your partner looks good.
5. **Avoid judging** – Except in terms of whether your partner or the scene needs help.
6. **Surrender. Give Up.** – Let go of control. It's ok to be confused.
7. **Have Fun!** – One of the most important rules. People learn and remember more when they are having fun and enjoying themselves.

Then, Play Some Games:

Note for facilitators: Start this workshop with a warm-up activity or two before diving into the more involved games. Begin by explaining the game (or at least the first part of the game) and then lead the group through the exercise.

Warm-Up Activities

Pass the Clap

All players in a circle. The leader explains that the group will be passing energy around the circle with claps. The leader demonstrates with a person next to them by asking them to make eye contact with them and then clapping with him/her at the same time. The leader then directs that person to passing the energy (i.e., the clap), to the person next to them. That person then turns to the person next to them and does the same thing. This continues around the circle. This establishes a solid rhythm to know when to clap. The clap goes in the same direction around the circle. Once the group has that down solid, introduce the concept of the double clap. If someone passes the clap to you, you can clap again to reverse the energy and then the clap goes in the opposite direction. Anyone can choose to clap twice and all players need to be ready to pass it off or receive it again to pass back.

Good for: fun, group dynamics, bringing up the energy, getting out of your head.

Zoom/ Race Track

All players in a circle. The leader explains that the group will imitate a race track by sending an imaginary car around the circle by each player motioning by swinging their arms and pointing to the next person saying the word "zoom". Zoom travels around in a circle. After that is established, the Leader introduces additional options (one by one, so that group gets

comfortable with each before moving on):

Brakes: A player makes a screeching noise and holds up both hands to the player that just passed zoom to them. This reverses the direction and “zoom” goes back the other way.

Bump: When a player says “bump” and motions a bump with their hands, it will skip the person next to the person who said “bump” and continue the “zoom” going in a circle.

Pass the canyon: This allows the energy to be sent across the circle to another person. Pass the canyon is initiated by someone saying “**yee haw!**” and with their arm motioning across the circle to another player. The player should clearly indicate (with both their arm and eye contact) who they are passing the Zoom to. Zoom then continues with the person who receives the “pass the canyon” gesture.

Oil slick: This is the final modification that is introduced, and it allows players to introduced a bit of mayhem into the exercise. If a player shouts out “**oil slick,**” all the players run in the middle, scramble and reorganize in a new circle. The player that said “oil slick” will resume the zoom.

Introduce these options one at a time starting with zoom, then brakes, then bump, then pass the canyon, then oil slick, so that the group is familiar with one before moving on.

Good for: fun, warming up, group mind, thinking on your feet, flexibility, getting energy up and letting go.



Players pass “Zoom” around a circle during a warm-up exercise.

Pass the Object

All players in a circle. One person mimes holding an invisible object in their hands, interacting with it accordingly so that it’s clear to others what the object is. After miming the object for a moment, they should pass it on to the next person, who reacts accordingly when they take it. They can interact with the object for a few seconds and then pass it on to the next person, or they can morph the object into something else before passing it on. When the group gets comfortable with the activity, they can start to pass and receive objects in more creative ways (e.g., throwing across the circle rather than passing to a neighbor).

Good for: fun, warming up, agreement, group dynamics.

Zip Zap Zop

All players in a circle. Ask the group to repeat the words “Zip, Zap, Zop” a few times. The leader starts the game by sending energy to another player using a strong forward motion with one arm pointed at another player in the circle and saying “Zip. The next person takes the energy and passes it immediately to someone else saying “Zap.” That person passes it on to another participant with a “Zop.” The game continues and the “Zip, Zap, Zop” sequence is repeated (quickly!) as the energy moves randomly around the circle. Encourage all players to use their whole body to send energy and to make eye contact. They can send the energy to whomever they want but the goal is to include all players. Practice the game for fun at first. If there is a mistake, encourage students to simply resume playing without discussion. The group challenge is to go very quickly and stay consistent in rhythm; if students struggle,

pause the game, discuss strategy and try again. When the group gets warmed up, it can be run as a competition, in which players are out of the circle if they say the wrong word or don't respond quickly enough.

Good for: fun, warming up, eye contact, group dynamics, getting the energy up.



Explora colleagues Eric and Allison battle it out in a final round of Zip Zap Zop.

Improv Games

What Are You Doing?

Begin with two people up. The rest of the group is ready to enter. The first person begins by pantomiming a common activity (brushing teeth, hair, washing hands, etc). The second player asks, "What are you doing?" The first person instead of saying what they are doing, will say a different activity. The second player now has to begin doing the new activity. Once the new person begins doing the new activity, the first person asks, "What are you doing?". This continues back and forth until someone messes up. A new player jumps in and replaces them. The object is to get this going quickly back and forth so no overthinking is allowed! The leader explains the game and facilitates the people leaving and entering the game based on how the game is going.

This can also be run with the full group. When the first person is asked what they are doing, they say a different activity and the rest of the group starts doing that new activity. Anyone in the group can then ask, “What are you doing?” and someone else can answer with a new activity.

Good for: encouraging flexibility, getting into the body and out of the head, embracing change as well as practicing gesturing, facial expressions and enthusiasm.

One Word at a Time Expert

Begin with two players and a leader/interviewer. The two players are (together) an expert on a specific subject chosen randomly by the audience. The expert is really one person with two heads, and answers to the interviewer’s question are provided word by word, one word at a time per player. After 2 players jump up, the leader will ask the audience “What is this person’s expertise?” Then the leader encourages the experts to begin taking the audiences’ questions. Three or four questions per pair is suitable.

Good for: co-creating, taking care of your partner, thinking on your feet, listening, letting go of your own ideas, and making something out of nothing.



‘One Word at a Time Experts’ share their expertise about squirrels, answering a series of funny

questions about squirrels, one word per person at a time.

One Word Story or One Sentence Story

All players in a circle. Start by getting a suggestion for a title of a story that has never been told. One at a time, each person will add a word/sentence to create a cohesive story. Prior to beginning, the leader should describe the game and discuss the basics of story telling. The story should be at a 3rd or 4th grade level. Remind them of the elements of storytelling: we need a set up (which includes a main character), a struggle or conflict and a resolution. The story should relate to the title.

Stories can also be told one sentence at a time, in which each player builds on what has been said by stating "Yes, and ..." before completing the sentence.

Good for: listening skills, agreement, building on what was said, thinking on your feet, letting go of your own ideas and practicing the elements of telling a good story.

Press Conference

One player leaves the room, while the audience determines who that player will be. They can be a famous or historical person or a well-known fictional character. The `absent` player will give a press conference as that person/character, but does not know who s/he is. The other players are journalists, whose questions should provide indications as to who the mystery guest might be. Game ends when our player guesses who s/he is. The leader will ask who wants to play and send that person out of the room. The leader then guides the group to determine the person's identity. Once decided, the leader will get the person from outside and welcome them into the room as if the press conference were beginning. The leader can say, "We are so glad you are here. So many people have questions for you so take it away." The person should begin calling on "journalists" one at a time; they ask questions that gradually provide clues to the player as to who they are supposed to be. The leader will need to check in periodically to see if the person knows who s/he is. If they are having a hard time figuring it out, the audience should ask more obvious questions, to help the player out.

Good for: embracing the unknown, learning how to ask questions that provoke discovery, having fun and letting go.

New Choice / Say It Again (for scientists)

Scientists share a brief version of their story, similar to how they might introduce themselves or their work at a science café. At any time, the host can ring a bell or merely shout "new choice" or "say it again" and the scientist must change his or her word or phrasing (that was

just said) to something else, in order to make what is being said clearer for a non-scientist audience.

Good for: encouraging flexibility, not getting stuck in your own ideas, thinking on your feet, being spontaneous, avoiding scientific jargon.

Workshop Wrap-Up

Following a series of games, the facilitator should lead a reflection with the group, asking them about their experience and how these activities might help them with their presentation.

- How was this experience for you?
- What was most challenging about these activities?
- How might these activities help you in preparing for your café presentation?

Additional Online Resources

Science Friday: “These science students learn to think on their feet.” 11/27/2015

<http://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/these-science-students-learn-to-think-on-their-feet/>

PRI: “What happens when you give scientists comedy improv lessons?” 12/14/2015

<http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-12-14/what-happens-when-you-give-scientists-comedy-improv-lessons>