

THTR 122: Improvisation and Theatre Games
2 Units
Fall 2020 — Thursdays — 2-3:50pm
Location: see Zoom via Blackboard

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers
Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda>
Office Hours: By appointment — schedule via email.
USC Slack: @Kirstin Eggers

Course Description

"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." — Charles Darwin

In this experiential workshop course, students will learn and build upon the tenets and rules of theatrical improvisation, with ultimate emphasis on applying these to one's own life. Through theatre games, and improvised experiences and performance, students will work toward freeing themselves physically, vocally, emotionally, and mentally, to stimulate communication, creativity, imagination, self-expression, and the collaborative spirit.

This course may be taken for credit twice.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Apply the "rules of improv" as they relate to relationship, storytelling, and performance;
2. Practice being present in their mind, body and spirit;
3. Evaluate improv performances for content and quality;
4. Empathetically discover human nature through character exploration;
5. Perform confidently in unscripted material;
6. Evaluate their own performance and participation with the intent of self-growth;
7. and relate the improvisational theatre tenets to their own personal and professional lives.

"Improv is the only belief system I've ever experienced that directly works on how to be. Just how to be." — Ilana Glazer

Course Notes

Due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of improv, classes must be synchronous for your success -- you must attend online class LIVE.

Communication

Please email me at kegggers@usc.edu any time with questions or concerns. Emails will generally be returned within 48 hours on weekdays. I can also meet with you via my Zoom personal meeting room. After the University incorporates Slack, that may be an acceptable way to get in touch with me as well.

I also ask that the class as a whole have a communication group, platform of your choice, so you can easily get in touch with each other.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Students will use Zoom with Audio and Video. To fully engage with all in-class activities, Video On and Unmuted are necessary settings. However, students may use virtual backgrounds, and earphones or headsets to improve audio quality.

USC Technology Rental Program

If you need resources to successfully participate in your classes, such as a laptop or internet hotspot, you may be eligible for the university's equipment rental program. To apply, please submit an application at studentbasicneeds.usc.edu.

USC Technology Support Links

Zoom information for students:
keep-teaching.usc.edu/tools/zoom/
Blackboard help for students:
studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu
Software available to USC Campus:
software.usc.edu

Required Readings

Students may be given pdfs and/or links throughout the semester which they are expected to read and retain for discussion. All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Required Viewing

Students are required to attend at least one live online improv show of your choice, and turn in a written response to the show. There will be an active Blackboard thread (or GoogleDoc), on which we can suggest online improv shows for each other.

Supplemental Readings

- *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deveare Smith
- *Life Unscripted: Using Improv Principles to Get Unstuck, Boost Confidence, and Transform Your Life* by Jeff Katzmann, MD and Dan O'Connor
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Improv Nation: How We Made A Great American Art* by Sam Wasson
- *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin
- *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone

Supplemental Viewing/Watching/Listening

- *Middleditch & Schwartz*
- *Whose Line Is It Anyway* episodes
- Improvised film and television, such as Christopher Guest mockumentaries, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Bajillion Dollar Properties*, *Reno 911*, among others
- Improvised-centered podcasts such as *Comedy Bang Bang*, *The Hills of Baldwin*, *Spontaneanation*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, among others

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Below is a general overview of the assignments. A detailed assignment description will be posted on Blackboard with ample time for each assignment.

- In-class exercises with enthusiastic participation is the most important part of your success in this class. The bulk of the coursework takes place in class experientially, as is the nature of improv — you must learn by Being Here Now. Points are awarded for presence, focus, attitude, willingness. If you must miss a class, you must watch the recorded class session and write a thoughtful response of concepts covered that day, to receive in-class exercises points for the day. You may make-up class asynchronously for credit no more than twice.
- Family Member Monologue — You will write, rehearse, and perform a 45 second-1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves — how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be truthful.
- Stranger/Documentary Monologue — You will observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes — observe their physicality, vocal qualities, attitude. If you are not able to observe a stranger, you may observe a real person in a documentary in the same way. Write, rehearse, and perform a 30 second monologue as that person. Be specific.
- Self-Reflections — You will write two self-reflections throughout the semester, one at the beginning of the semester, and one at the end. Detailed instructions and prompts will be posted on Blackboard.
- Live Improv Show Response — You will write one response to a live improv show. The show you choose to attend must be over the course of the semester, not something you have seen previously in your life. Many improv groups and theatres are finding innovative ways to do improv during this time. We will keep a Blackboard thread (or GoogleDoc) with shows/groups we find to help each other out with current shows.
- Extended Team Improv (Midterm) — You will perform with teammates in an extended improv. Extended focus will be needed. Exact format to be determined.
- Final Jam — You will participate (choose format, announce, improvise) in a full "Improv Jam" performance.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
In-class exercises — presence, focus, attitude, willingness (2/class)	26
Character Monologue (Family Member)— written and performed	5
Character Monologue (Stranger/Documentary)— written and performed	5
Self-Reflections (6 points each)	12
Live Improv Show Response	7
Midterm Team Extended Improv — comprehension, willingness, application of learned techniques	20
Final Jam — Skill level, growth, commitment, application of learned techniques	25
TOTAL	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

A = 95-100 pts	B+ = 87-89 pts	C+ = 77-79 pts	D+ = 67-69 pts	F = 59 or below
A- = 90-94 pts	B = 83-86 pts	C = 73-76 pts	D = 63-66 pts	
	B- = 80-82 pts	C- = 70-72 pts	D- = 60-62 pts	

Assignment Submission Policy

Performance Assignments are presented in class, and copies of associated written work do not need to be submitted, although you must be prepared.

Written Assignments should be posted on Blackboard before the deadline date and time. Late submissions will have points taken off. PDFs preferred. Do Not post link to a Google Doc. Format should be in loose MLA.

Grades will generally be posted to Blackboard within a week.

Extra-Curricular Commitments and ISPs

Should you choose to participate in any extra-curricular project, such as an Independent Student Production, the SDA administration and faculty will not make allowances or exceptions for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, homework that is required as preparation for class, or lack of participation in class resulting from your extra-curricular involvement.

Attendance

In-class exercises are essentially impossible to experience asynchronously, therefore missing more than 2 classes will lower your final grade. Being late or leaving early for more than 3 classes will also lower your final grade.

Classroom Norms

- Please keep attention on the class, not on phones, other internet, other beings in your house, etc. This is to encourage your focus, mindfulness, and respect to the ensemble.
- Please wear clothing in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.
- Please reserve break-time activities for before and after class. Depending on the day's flow, we may or may not take an official break in the hour and fifty minutes of class — you should be prepared to stay active in the class, both as performer and audience.
- Please don't eat or chew gum during class.
- Please stay upright unless the scene/activity calls for otherwise.

- Be honest with yourself about how and where you will do your best learning, and commit to it.

Zoom Etiquette

- You must have Video on, unless the scene/activity calls for otherwise.
- Please keep the Zoom chat quiet during scenes/activities.
- You will often be asked to stay UNmuted during class, unless you have ambient noise you can't control.
- Having a quiet, private place in which to improv is the most important Zoom setting there is! Preferably with a little space to move around. Improv can get wild, so set yourself up for success by not having distractions or an audience.

Synchronous session recording notice

All synchronous class sessions will be recorded and provided to all students asynchronously.

Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

USC policy prohibits sharing of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

SCampus Section 11.12(B): Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is a violation of the USC Student Conduct Code. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).

What happens in class, stays in class!

Course Evaluation

Learning Experience Evaluations should be completed before the last class session, via the link USC provides.

"Improv is so freeing because there are no bounds; there's no safety net. You just say something and get an instant response." —Nicole Byer

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Please note: due to the fluid and creative nature of this course, weekly structure will change to accommodate the needs of individuals and the ensemble. You are asked to remain flexible, and you will be informed of any changes as much as possible.

Most classes will begin with group work and warm-ups, exploring foundations of presence, physicality, focus, relaxation, concentration, imagination, storytelling, playfulness, and ensemble-building.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
1	Thu Aug 20	Welcome/Introductions Introduction to warm-ups and theatre exercises. Begin ensemble work. Syllabus review. Class boundaries discussion		Read pdfs from <i>Bossypants</i> and <i>Letters to a Young Artist</i> .
2	Thu Aug 27	Tenets/Basics of Improv The Only Lecture/Discussion — taking notes encouraged. “YES, AND” exploration.	<i>Bossypants</i> and <i>Letters to a Young Artist</i> read for discussion.	Write Self-Reflection #1. Prompts and detailed assignment description posted on Blackboard. Must be posted on Blackboard before September 3 class.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
3	Thu Sep 3	<p>Storytelling, Status, Space Work, Relationship</p> <p>Exercises focused on space work (using the space/stage and “pantomime”), telling individual and group stories, beginning character work through Status, and establishing relationship.</p>	Self-Reflection #1	
4	Thu Sep 10	<p>Physicality & Voice Exploration</p> <p>Beginning character work with voice and physicality, including gibberish and over-the-top work.</p> <p>Tenets of improv, continued.</p>		Write and rehearse a 45 second - 1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves — how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be truthful.
5	Thu Sep 17	<p>Presentation of family member monologues.</p> <p>Further character work, within scenes.</p>	Perform a 45 second - 1 minute monologue you wrote, playing a family member you know very well.	Observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes (set your timer!). OR watch a real person in a documentary. Observe their physicality, listen to their voice. Write a 30 second monologue playing that stranger — what is happening to them that day? Be specific.
6	Thu Sep 24	<p>Perform Stranger Monologues.</p> <p>Practice open scenes, filling in the details of character, location, story, etc.</p> <p>Continuation of character work in scenes.</p>	Present Stranger Monologues.	
7	Thu Oct 1	Review and Practice Improv Basics		Prepare mentally for Midterm — review rules of improv.
8	Thu Oct 8	<p><u>Midterm Exam Performance (Extended Team Improv)</u></p> <p>In-class performance of to be-determined improv format, with ensemble as a whole.</p>	Midterm Today	
9	Thu Oct 15	<p>Discuss Midterm.</p> <p>Games: Character/Experts/Styles</p> <p>Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on character, expert, and style games.</p>		
10	Thu Oct 22	<p>Games: Guessing/Timed/Energy</p> <p>Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on guessing, timed and energy-driven games.</p>		Last chance to attend a live improv show of your choice. Prompts and detailed assignment description posted on Blackboard.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
11	Thu Oct 29	Rehearse for Final Improv Jam Discuss shows we attended. Discuss format for Final Improv Jam. Rehearse in small groups. Learn more performance games as needed.	Written Response of Live Improv Show, posted on Blackboard before class.	
12	Thu Nov 5	Final Rehearsal for Final Improv Jam Together, determine final Improv Jam format. Final rehearsal.		Prepare mentally for Jam — review calling assignments, formats, rules. Invite guests?
13	Thu Nov 12	Final Improv Jam! Perform improv for each other, and possibly guests. Jam will be filmed to watch and evaluate during our assigned Final time. *Learning Experience Evaluations must be completed.	Final Jam Today	
FINAL	TUES NOV 17 — 2pm-4pm	Discuss Improv Jam, Postmortem. Write Final Self-Evaluation, prompts given in class.		Happy Almost-End-of-2020?

“Improvors connect for the same basic reason you and your friends connect. Say you meet someone. You like something about them and they like something about you. Your mutual interest begets mutual play. Play begets cooperation and mutual understanding, which, trampled by fun, becomes love. Love is the highest form of play.” — Sam Wasson

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

- Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call suicidepreventionlifeline.org

- Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault

- Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) - (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298 equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

- Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298 usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report

- Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776 dsp.usc.edu

- Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710 campussupport.usc.edu

- Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101 diversity.usc.edu

- Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

- Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call dps.usc.edu

- Non-emergency assistance or information.