

# TD 306: *Introduction to Improvisational Drama*

Fall 2019

Unique Number: 25299

M/W 9:30-11a, Winship B.202

**Instructor:** Laura Epperson

**Email:** [laura.mw.epperson@gmail.com](mailto:laura.mw.epperson@gmail.com)

**Pronouns:** she/her/hers

**Office:** Winship B.122

**Office Hours:** Monday 11a-12:30p

*\*The best way to meet with me is to make an appointment by talking with me after class or sending an email with dates/times you are available.*

*Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*

*—Howard Thurman*

## *About the Course*

Improvisation is the act of creating spontaneously or “in the moment.” This class is an introduction to the various skills, practices, and theories of improvisational drama. Our exploration of this art requires no prior experience or knowledge of the form. The class will function as an ensemble and our classroom as a supportive space for creative expression, bravery, and generosity. Over the course of the semester, we will develop skills in accepting offers, heightening awareness, and storytelling. These tools will fuel our investigation of improvisation both as performance and in applications outside of theatre.

## *Questions that will guide this course:*

- What is improvisational theatre?
- What skills do we use when playing together in improvised scenes?
- What theoretical and pedagogical frameworks underpin improvisational theatre?
- How can a community of improvisers support each other in taking risks?
- How do we use improvisation in our daily lives?
- Name a question of your own: \_\_\_\_\_

## *Course Skills and Objectives*

Over the course of the semester, we will practice and develop the following skills which will fuel our personal and collective journeys into improvisation both as performers and in applications outside of the theatre context.

### **Skill 1: Foundations**

We will build improvisation skills including: spontaneity, presence, trust, giving and receiving offers, status, pantomime, and creating character.

**Skill 2: Learning to See and Observe**

We will demonstrate trust, spontaneity, awareness and nonverbal communication through class activities.

**Skill 3: Collaboration and Co-Creation**

We will collaborate as supportive members of an ensemble to practice and perform improvised scenes.

**Skill 4: Widening Circles**

We will see, discuss, and write about improvisation performances in a critically constructive, respectful and detailed way.

**Skill 5: Comprehending Theory**

We will read, listen to, and interrogate improvisational theory, skills, and techniques.

**Skill 6: Applications**

We will understand how improvisational drama can be used in non-theatrical settings.

**Skill 7: Reflection**

We will reflect on individual growth as an ensemble member and performer.

The development of these skills will help us meet the following learning objectives:

- Articulate a definition of improvisation and the different forms it takes
- Demonstrate collaborative play with team members
- Identify and utilize key improvisation vocabulary
- Question and disrupt stereotypes as they relate to improvised scenes in both theatrical and non-theatrical contexts
- Incorporate the skills of improvisation into their daily life or chosen profession

## *Canvas and Communication*

This course uses Canvas and email for communication. Please check your email and Canvas regularly for updates on course assignments. On Canvas, you will find the course syllabus, schedule, assignments, readings, and instructor contact information. You can access Canvas at <http://canvas.utexas.edu>. **All assignment will be submitted on canvas** unless otherwise noted by the instructor.

## *Course Readings*

*Truth in Comedy: The Manual for Improvisation* by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson

*Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* by Mick Napier

*Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* by Stephen Nachmanovitch

*A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* by Anne Bogart

*How to be the Greatest Improviser on Earth* by Will Hines

*Improvisation at the Speed of Life* by T.J Jagodowski

The readings for this course complement the session topics. They have been chosen to offer past and present points of view relating to improvisational drama. All readings are stored in the “Files” section of the Canvas site in PDF format.

Throughout the course, I will also post videos, sketches, and clips to Canvas related to improvisational drama.

## *Overview of Course Grading and Assignments*

### **Assignment Evaluation**

*Evaluation rubrics for all assignments will be posted on Canvas.*

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Participation</b>	<b>45</b>
—Student Profile, Due Tue 9/3 @ 5p	—2
—Attendance and Approach (28 classes x1pt each)	—28
—Self-Evaluation #1, Due Mon 9/25	—5
—Self-Evaluation #2, Due Wed 10/30	—5
—Self-Evaluation #3, Due 12/4	—5
<b>Canvas Discussions (5 posts+responses x2pts each)</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Performance Sharings</b>	<b>20</b>
—Short Form Approach, Perform Wed 10/16	—5
—Short Form Self-Reflection, Due Mon 10/28	—5
—Long Form Approach, Perform Wed 11/20 or Mon 11/25	—5
—Long Form Self-Reflection, Due Mon 12/19	—5
<b>Performance Attendance and Response Paper (due Mon 11/18)</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Final Individual Presentation &amp; Reflection</b>	<b>15</b>
—Personal Creative Presentation, Perform Mon 12/2 or Wed 12/4	—10
—Individual Course Reflection, Due Fri 12/13 @ 5p	—5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>

## Grading System

A 100-92	B+ 89-87	B- 81-80	C 76-72	D+ 69-67	D- 61-60
A- 91-90	B 86-82	C+ 79-77	C- 71-70	D 67-62	

## Course Assignment Descriptions

### *PARTICIPATION*

---

To state the obvious... if you are not present in class you can not participate. To state the perhaps less obvious... if you are not present in class, our entire ensemble is different and diminished. YOUR PRESENCE MATTERS.

### **Student Profile (2.5 pts)**

*Due Tues 9/3 @ 5p*

This is a brief but detailed gathering of information. Timely and complete earns 2 full points. The assignment is more detailed on Canvas in "Assignments." Please be specific.

### **Attendance and Approach (1 pt possible for each class meeting=28 pts total)**

Class begins at 9:30am and ends at 10:45am. You are able to earn up to 1 point each class for your attendance and approach. Attendance is evaluated on whether you are present in class. Approach is evaluated based on your individual ability, attitude, and progress based on overall class interaction, active participation, readiness, self-discipline, awareness and respect of others and the space, curiosity, exploration, and a genuine work ethic. The expectation is that you will always play to the highest of your intelligence and respect the instructor and your classmates as we take risks and engage in the challenges of our work together.

To earn full approach points, each class period you should practice:

- Punctuality and preparation
- Active engagement in class
- Participation in discussion of assigned readings
- Respect and support for peers and instructor
- Positive attitude, curiosity, and willingness to take risks

Again, attendance and participation are essential not only for your own learning and growth, but for the learning and growth of the whole class. I expect each person will be present for all class meetings, except in the case of the following excused absences: illness (documentation from a physician if missing more than one session), personal/family emergencies, professional obligations (give at least 2 weeks notice), and religious holy days (give 14 days notice, per UT policy). If you exceed 3 unexcused absences, you and I will meet to discuss your attendance challenges and consequences for absences moving forward. Excessive absences may result in a meeting with your advisor and/or a lowered final grade.

You will miss points for all missed in-class assignments or activities and these generally cannot be made up. **Performance Sharing and Final Creative Presentations cannot be made up.**

You are encouraged to exchange contact information with at least two people in class. If you miss class, contact these folks to catch up on what you missed.

**Self-Evaluations (3 evaluations x 5 pts each)**

*Due Wed 9/25, Wed 10/30, and Wed 12/4*

Three times during the semester, you will be asked to write a 50-100 word assessment of your participation and growth throughout the course. Specific prompts and criteria will be posted to Canvas.

***READING REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES***

---

**Canvas Discussions (5 posts+responses x 2 pts each = 10 pts total)**

*Post #1 due: Mon 9/16 + Wed 9/18*

*Post #2 due: Mon 9/30 + Wed 10/2*

*Post #3 due: Mon 10/21 + Wed 10/23*

*Post #4 due: Mon 11/4 + Wed 11/6*

*Post #5 due: Mon 11/18 + Wed 11/20*

Throughout the semester, you will engage in a class discussion board on Canvas. Every other week (or so) you will be asked to post 50-100 words to reply to a question, reflect on an activity, respond to a video or reading, define terms from class, or even tell a joke or funny story. **All discussion posts are due by Monday at 9:30a.**

To build our collaborative community, you are also asked to respond to at least one of your colleagues. **These responses should be 25-75 words and are due by 9:30a on Wednesday.**

Topics for weekly conversations will be posted in advance, no later than 9:30a on Fridays. Please post with kindness and generosity. We may disagree with one another, but please be courteous and respectful. Be mindful of your intention and the impact of your words. Grammar and punctuation matter.

***PERFORMANCE SHARINGS***

---

At the end of each unit, we will create small groups to prepare and share a performance with the class. The purpose of these sharings is to demonstrate an understanding of the skills/theory taught in class and to show your personal growth as an ensemble member and performer. You will be evaluated on these sharings according to your effort, demonstration of skills, and contribution as an ensemble member.

**Performance Sharing #1 - Short Form (5 pts)**

*Perform Wed 10/16*

This performance is a series of short rule based improv games facilitated by a host and based on audience suggestions. You will form small ensembles and choose a series of three games to perform for the class. After the performance, the class will respond to the overall energy and flow of the performance and individual choices they saw made on stage. Groups/individuals will be assessed on their ability to: introduce the activities, take and use suggestions, play within and with the rules of the games, give and receive offers, and work as an ensemble.

**Performance Sharing #2 - Long Form (5 pts)**

*Perform Wed 11/20 or Mon 11/25*

This performance is a series of open (rule free) improv scenes linked by theme or character that begin with a single audience suggestion. The class will be divided into teams and each team will be asked to perform a 15-minute long form improv show based on the tenets of the Harold structure. After the performance, the class will respond to the choices within scene work and overall cohesiveness of the show. Groups/individuals will be assessed on their ability to: build scenes, support scene partners, callback offers, work as an ensemble, and generate a cohesive story or thematically based performance.

**Performance Self-Reflection Papers (2 papers x 5 pts each = 10 pts total)**

*Short Form Reflection due Mon 10/28*

*Long Form Reflection due Mon 12/9*

After each performance sharing, you will assess yourself through a post-performance reflection that includes your own thoughts as well as ideas from the readings and responses from your classmates. Specific prompts and criteria will be posted to Canvas.

***PERFORMANCE ATTENDANCE & RESPONSE PAPER***

---

You are required to attend one live improv performance in Austin. While not a comprehensive list, you can visit the following websites for upcoming performances:

[www.hideouttheatre.com/calendar](http://www.hideouttheatre.com/calendar)  
[www.coldtownetheater.com/comedy-shows/](http://www.coldtownetheater.com/comedy-shows/)  
[www.merlin-works.com/shows/](http://www.merlin-works.com/shows/)  
[www.theinstitutiontheater.com/shows/](http://www.theinstitutiontheater.com/shows/)  
[www.falloutcomedy.com/shows/](http://www.falloutcomedy.com/shows/)

Tickets to performances usually average \$10 - \$20. It is your responsibility to select a performance to attend, reserve, pay for tickets and travel to the performance. You are

welcome and encouraged to attend performances with your classmates.

**Performance Response Paper (10 pts)**

*Due Mon 11/18*

You will write a 500-700 word typed, double-spaced, response paper after attending an improv performance. The paper should discuss the performance's relevance to our work in class along with your personal experience of the performance event.

The response paper must also include the following elements:

- I. Basic Information (place at top of page)
  - A. Your Name
  - B. The date, time, and title of the performance you attended
  - C. Name and location of the performance venue
  - D. Name of the improvisation troupe performing
- II. Style or Format and Suggestion
  - A. Briefly describe the type of style or format that the performers are presenting. Is it short form or long form? If short form, what games are they playing? If long form, what type of story are they telling? This is often announced at the top of the show along with the suggestion.
  - B. What type of suggestion did the performers get? How did they ask for it? Why do you think they chose this type of suggestion? How did it feed into their work?
- III. Skills, Theory and Performance
  - A. What skills and/or theory from class do you see activated within the performance? How are the performers incorporating these skills/theory into the performance?
  - B. What elements make the performance interesting or engaging? Where did the performance lose you and what could the performers have done to keep the audience engaged?
  - C. Include at least one in-text citation from course readings.
- IV. Personal Assessment of Performance
  - A. Would you see this group perform again? Why? Why not?
  - B. What did the group do exceptionally well? What makes their style unique?
  - C. What will you take away from this performance?

***FINAL INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATION & REFLECTION***

---

**Personal Creative Presentation (10 pts)**

*Present on Mon 12/2 or Wed 12/4*

At the end of semester, you will prepare a 10 minute creative presentation reflecting on your journey and how you will apply the skills developed in this class in the future. This creative presentation should include:

- one sound effect (or music)

- two props
- three visual aids (may be technology)

These creative presentations should be fun, but honest reflections on how the readings, activities, assignments and content of this course will impact your future.

### **Individual Course Reflection (5 pts)**

*Due on Fri 12/13 @ 5p*

As a final culminating assignment, you will write a 1-2 page reflection on your discoveries and growth throughout the course. A more detailed assignment will be covered in class and posted on Canvas.

## *Course Policies*

### **Participation, Risk, Personal Contact, and Consent**

Acting asks players to step outside of their comfort zone and into a place that can be emotionally vulnerable. Improvisation requires a safe space in which we as artists may feel comfortable taking risks, expanding our understanding of ourselves and of others. I expect you to come to class willing to be open emotionally, mentally, and physically to the best of your ability. Most importantly, I expect you to respect yourself, respect others, and respect the space and community we create together. The best improvisation comes from truth and as an ensemble we will strive to foster an environment where honest storytelling and risk-taking flourishes.

Additionally, please know that by their nature, the activities of this course may require some physical contact between actors or by me. Always ask for and receive consent before touching another student. In general, stay fully present, be aware of your surroundings, and respectful of others and we will work together well. Remain conscious of your physical abilities and feel free to sit out of an activity that presents discomfort or harm. It's helpful if you notify the instructor of any limitations before the course or after class if you decide to pass on an activity. The instructor and players within a scene or activity reserve the right to stop that scene or activity if at any moment they see potential danger to a player's physical safety or their emotional safety. This can be done by yelling "stop scene" and crossing your arms over your chest if the motion is possible.

### **Our Work Space**

Acting requires a community in which each member is fully present. Unless explicitly stated, no electronics (phones, computers, tablets, iPods, etc.) will be need for in-class discussion and activities. Please put them away before class begins and do not take them out until class is over. You are expected to be fully present (physically and mentally) during each in-class performance. Please wear footwear and clothing that allows for movement. Inappropriate clothing is not an excuse to not participate. No



food, gum, or candy is permitted during game play, rehearsal, or performance. Beverages with a lid are okay. Water is encouraged. If you have an issue that will prevent you from following any of these policies, please let me know before class begins.

### **Accommodations:**

Students with disabilities may request appropriate accommodations from the Services for Students with Disabilities: <http://ddce.utexas.edu/disability/>; 512-471-6259; [ssd@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:ssd@austin.utexas.edu); or videophone 512-471-6644). Please also set up a meeting with me to discuss how to best meet your needs in this course.

### **Concealed Carry Policy**

As of 1 August 2016, license to carry holders (LTCH) are allowed handguns in most parts of campus. All UT policies and information around this law can be found at <https://campuscarry.utexas.edu/> (All quotations here are from that web page). The LTCH is solely responsible for following both the law and UT policy. That policy states:

“Students who do not follow UT policy are subject to discipline by the Dean of Students.” Additionally, “accidental discharge of a handgun by any ... student may be cause for disciplinary action, up to and including ... expulsion ...” That policy also states: “Although you can carry in many places on campus, you cannot carry everywhere or when engaged in activities that make carrying a handgun impossible.” This course will, at times, be one of those places. This class will have class sessions where the activities will make it impossible for a LTCH both to carry legally and participate in required class work, such as in-class activities that require physical participation. A refusal to participate will be recorded as an absence for that day. If a gun is seen in class, the instructor and TA reserve the right to call UTPD. A LTCH who does not follow state law and UT policy will automatically fail the course.

### **Academic Integrity**

I assume all written and creative work you submit is your own. Plagiarism is a serious offense. Use appropriate citations to give credit when and where it's due (MLA preferred). Refer to the Dean of Student's website for additional info: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/academicintegrity.php>