I. Course Description – Practice and Theory:

Improvisation for the theater, at least for the modern theater in the western world, began as theater games, in the mid-twentieth century in Chicago. The inspiration for the form came from Viola Spolin, who wrote the book *Improvisation for the Theater* while teaching, directing children’s theater projects at Hull House, and leading theater workshops in which she had the kids — and later adults — play games onstage. She did this with the help of her son, Paul Sills, at the Compass Players, in a bar of that name in Hyde Park, the University of Chicago neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. A few years later, Paul founded and became Artistic Director of The Second City. Viola Spolin played traditional games with her pupils and invented games to play onstage, to develop structure for playing in comfort, in an atmosphere in which the teacher/director could slip into the background and make suggestions without judgment. This created an atmosphere in which participants could have fun while getting to know each other and building trust among the group. (It might be good to mention here that when Paul directed professional companies, he put them together as they showed up to play with each other, not to audition for a coalition of stand-out actors.)

So now we conduct a Theater Games workshop (more play than work). We find out where we are as players — as actors, as characters. We find out who we are in a scene — in a sketch, in a show, in a blackout, in an exercise. And, finally, we look at what we are doing: are we playing a game with connection to the stage, or are we playing one for a different reason, or for no reason at all except to play, or to enjoy ourselves onstage, but within a structure? We will play a great deal. We will look back each session and write a few notes on what happened, and what we feel about it. This little set of notes is not theory, but will precede theory. Right now play, spontaneous play, is our practice, our experience; we learn from this experience.

After playing for a few sessions, we will begin to read, and to analyze what we are reading. We begin with Viola Spolin’s fine text, *Improvisation for the Theater*. For theory and practice,
this is mostly a handbook — one might say, the handbook. We will move to *Something Wonderful Right Away* by Jeffrey Sweet, and then come up to date with T.J. Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi’s description of what they do on stage, *Improvisation at the Speed of Light*. There you have it: the practice and theory, spontaneity in the zone and how it comes alive.

II. Learning Outcomes, Competencies, Objectives:

Students should leave the course with an enhanced awareness of themselves at play, onstage and off. The student can expect to be familiar with the historical and recent iterations of the improv form, and with a context for this kind of theater, and the student should be able to perceive imaginative learning as a palpable experience. More confidence in public situations will naturally emerge.

**Competencies Offered:**

**A-1-X: (Interpreting Improvisation as a Form of Theater)** Can define and analyze the relationship between the art of theater and the art of artistic improvisation

In Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater*, she writes: “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise . . . If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach. ‘Talent’ or ‘lack of talent’ have little to do with it.” As in art, so in life: we learn how to acquire and hone new skills by first discussing and defining them amongst our peers, and then putting them into practice in other settings. We will discover the broad applicability of theatrical skills and analytical views to diverse settings, including business, public service, and family life.

**A-2-A:** Can create an original work of art, explore its relationship to artistic forms, and reflect on the creative process. Reminds us to reflect on the creative process at each step of the way, and then in retrospect.

**A-3-D:** Can assess the assumptions and implications of a significant thinker’s ideas about work or leisure. Calls upon the student to read “significant thinkers” on the subject of leisure or the subject of work, and to summarize their thinking on possibly contrasting subjects, and to be aware of how this theory affects the student’s own ideas.

**A-5: Can define and analyze a creative process.**

1. Can define the concept of creativity.
2. Can identify, analyze, and describe the components of a creative process in one or more fields of human endeavor.
3. Can explain how engaging in a creative process affects one’s perception of the world.

III. Learning Strategies and Resources:

**Texts:**
Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*
Jeffrey Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away*
T.J. Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi, *Improvisation at the Speed of Light*

**Learning Strategies:** We will learn through in-class game play and discussion; we will read texts outside of class as assignments, write responses/reports on them, and discuss our findings in class; we will attend a professional theater event incorporating improv techniques, and report on our findings; we will direct and perform improv theater pieces as a final project.

**An Additional Resource:** Chicago is rich with professional and beginning improv theater companies – students may visit these and observe their work at any time during the course (and beyond!).

**IV. Learning Deliverables (graded evidences of learning)**

Assignments by all students will be self-assessed, in addition to assessment by the instructor. Workshop in terms of games played and effects on the students will be assessed by students and instructor. The games and response to the games are important for assessment; the notes are a warmup for written assignments.

a. The first formal assignment will be a written response after reading assigned section from Viola Spolin’s text *Improvisation for the Theater*, and will be due one week after it is assigned. We will discuss specifics of this written assignment in class. Instructor will put this on the board, go over it with students, provide a print handout if necessary. (Competency: A-1-X)

b. The next assignment will be in response to a reading from Jeffrey Sweet’s *Something Wonderful Right Away*, in which Sweet interviews Paul Sills, co-founder of The Second City. This assignment will take more thought and work, and will be due two weeks after assigned, and returned by the instructor the following week. After Second City, Sills is our theorist: he brings Martin Buber’s thinking into the relationships between players and their craft. All papers are graded similarly, as far as instructor input is concerned. Particulars of this assignment will be discussed in class. (A-3-D)

c. Third will be a written review of a live improv show students will attend in Week 6 of the course.

d. Fourth and last of these assignments will be due two weeks after assigned, and returned the following week. This assignment will derive from a reading in Jagodowski and Pasquesi’s *Improvisation at the Speed of Life*, in which the authors discuss the contemporary approach to stage improv. (A5)

e. As a final project on Week 10 of the class, all students will direct an improv or sketch piece in performance during class, using other class members as participants. Students will each write a brief response/critique of their experience in the directing process, at the conclusion of the project.
Note: Overall understanding, interest, involvement, participation, and enthusiasm for the work and for each other will be assessed, along with formal assignments, at the end of the quarter.

V. Assessment of Student Learning

Most weight seems to fall on the writing of the founders of theater improvisation in the 1950s and early 1960s, Spolin and Sills; the contemporary book by the magicians of modern improv, Jagodowski and Pasquesi; and our own interpretations in 4 assigned papers. But most will fall on our final project.

Least weight appears to fall on the notes as we begin to experience what this form feels like in practice.

Somewhere in the middle, the workshops work their own magic.

Which all goes to say that an art form and art work is impossible to grade (except at the extremes), and therefore is quite easy. We try to carry the entire class as a wave, and sometimes succeed! Each class is like putting together an acting troupe of improvisers.

No late assignments will be accepted after the 11th week of the course. Please make every attempt to attend all classes, particularly Week 1.

VI. Grading Criteria & Scale

40% In-class participation in improv games and exercises
20% Written assignments on assigned texts
10% In-class participation in discussion of assigned texts
10% Written reports on experiences during improv games
10% Attendance at live improv theater event
10% Final directing project and response writeup

(These figures are approximate.)

Incomplete (IN) Grade: This process follows university policy.

A student who encounters an unusual or unforeseeable circumstance that prevents her/him/them from completing the course requirements by the end of the term may request a time extension to complete the work.

- The student must formally initiate the request by submitting the Contract for Issuance of Incomplete Grade form (via email, word doc), no later than week 10 (or prior to the final week of a shorter-term course).
- The instructor has discretion to approve or not approve the student’s request for an IN grade.
- The instructor has discretion to set the deadline for completion of the work, which may be earlier but no later than two quarters (not counting Summer term).
• The instructor may not enter an IN grade on behalf of a student without a completed and agreed upon contract.
• The student is alerted that IN grades are not considered by Financial Aid as evidence of satisfactory academic progress.

VII. Course Schedule

(This schedule is subject to change as the course proceeds – the instructor will inform students in class of changes if they happen.)

Week 1: Introduction to the course, each other, and our learning methods. (Competencies addressed: A-3-D, A-2-A, A5, A-1-X)

Week 2: Play improv games and make notes on our experiences and findings. A writeup of notes from Weeks 1 and 2 will be due at the end of class. (Note: See if your competencies fit.)

Week 3: Students make more notes on improv games and experiences at the end of the class session. (Note: See if your competencies fit.)

Week 4: Students make more notes on improv games and experiences at the end of the class session. (Note: See if your competencies fit.)

Week 5: This week, students will read Chapter 1 in Spolin’s Improvisation for the Theater. Summarize findings in the reading. Due in class on Week 6. (Note: See if your competencies fit.)

Week 6: Students are assigned to attend an improv show in the city (probably at iO or Second City) and write a review – due in class Week 8. Students hand in papers on Spolin reading. (A-3-D, A-2-A, A5, A-1-X)

Week 7: Students hand in response papers to Sweet/Sills reading. (See if your competencies fit.)

Week 8: Students hand in review papers on improv shows they attended. (See if your competencies fit.)

Week 9: Response paper on Jagodowski/Pasquesi reading due. (See if your competencies fit.)

Week 10: Final Project – in-class production. Every student directs a show or sketch or scene, casting other students to appear in it. (Competencies addressed: A-3-D, A-2-A, A5, A-1-X)

VIII. CCA/H/S (College Core, Arts and Ideas/Human Community/Scientific World) Section Supplement

a. Learning Outcomes: Following competency A-1-X: (Interpreting Improvisation as a Form of Theater): Can define and analyze the relationship between the art of theater and the art of artistic improvisation, students will engage in-class improv and theater games, and will compose written responses on these experiences. Students will also study assigned reading
materials and write responses/critiques of the ideas presented there, as well as participating in class discussions on the readings. A second competency (articulated by the CCA/H/S student) will also be addressed.

b. Expectations of Readings, Activities, and Assignments: In terms of quantity, the workload completed by a student in a CCA/H/S section will be equivalent to the workload completed by a student enrolled for 2 competencies. Students enrolled in the 4-credit CCA section must complete the readings and assignments corresponding to two of the course’s competencies, namely A-1-X and a second competency, aligning to the structure of their CCA/H/S course. The instructor is available to meet with students enrolled in CCA/H/S programs to review their questions and concerns.

IX. Course Policies

Attendance by the group and working together are of great importance to this subject matter. Please make every effort to attend all class sessions.

Changes to the originally published course syllabus will be communicated in the first session/week of the course in writing. If significant assignment changes are made during the course, it will be done officially with the consensus approval of students.

This course includes and adheres to the college and university policies described in the links below:

- Academic Integrity Policy (UGRAD)
- Incomplete (IN) and Research (R) Grades Expiration Policy
- Course Withdrawal Timelines and Grade/Fee Consequences
- Accommodations Based on the Impact of a Disability
- Protection of Human Research Participants

Other Resources for Students

- University Center for Writing-based Learning
- SNL Writing Guide
- Dean of Students Office

Further Suggested Readings:


**Instructor Brief Bio**

John Starrs is an actor, playwright, director, storyteller, and spoken word writer and performer. His graduate study in theater took place at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. He has played roles including Richard III and Tiresias, and has performed with the National Players in D.C., the New York Shakespeare Festival, The Body Politic, Wisdom Bridge, and The Goodman, among others in Chicago. He has hosted spoken word venues in the city. His work will be featured in a “John Starrs Celebration” at the Rhinoceros Theater Festival at Prop Thtr this year on Tuesday, February 19.