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“Yes, and-ing” Fieldwork: Using Improvisational Games to Assist Researchers and Novice Evaluators

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Title: “Yes, and-ing” Fieldwork: Using Improvisational Games to Assist Researchers and Novice Evaluators

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Abstract:

As our world and problems associated with human experience become more complex, so does our need to design research to meet the needs of contemporary inquiry. A call for mixed methodological designs by most national and international funding agencies (see IES, NIH, UN guidelines) requires preparing researchers and evaluators to assist students to listen better, think more quickly, and be comfortable with the concept of risk-taking, error, and failure in a variety of learning, research, and presentation contexts. Several institutions (SUNY-Stony Brook, UC-Irvine) are now using improvisational games to help students be more spontaneous when presenting their research and learn how to communicate to lay audiences (Basken, 2013; Patel, 2014). We believe that skills gleaned from improv games can accommodate a variety of research presentation contexts, similar to those skills needed for thorough fieldwork methods in qualitative research and evaluation practices.

A common goal of qualitative research and evaluation is to understand human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Such a research effort allows for the examination of (different) ways of knowing, and answers how and why questions about the ways in which people make sense of the world, their world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The need for sensitivity as the instrument in qualitative research must also be coupled with the interpretive and epistemologically grounded nature of constructionism (Merriam, 2009). As the research instrument, we position ourselves within the work, requiring an understanding of the meaning we give to the process and/or experience (subjectivity of researcher and co-participant). It is from this need for great awareness of self as a qualitative researcher that we draw a tight connection to the practice of improv. Improv focuses around teamwork, collaboration, and listening skills, all key to doing good qualitative fieldwork. Theater and improvisation are communal art forms, and, according to Diggles (2004), “both require not only spontaneity (*say the first thing that comes into your head*) but also sharing of offers (*Say ‘Yes! and...’ to all of your partner’s offers*), and generous, mutual support (*make your partner look good*)” (p. 1). Following these rules, students learn to encourage and support their research partners by building communication and teamwork skills to be used prior to or during research fieldwork. Furthermore, improvisation rewards those who are able to laugh at their setbacks, leave inhibitions behind, and play, thus generating space for reflexive growth.

Improv allows academics to “*yes-and*” a scene, transforming how they observe their environment and communicate their research to engage participants and audiences (i.e., students, conference attendees, faculty) in a way that is approachable, appropriate, creative, and playful. Improvisation can put students in touch with their own unique voice, fostering a confident and creative professional, an important quality for negotiating gatekeepers and following through with network or snowball sampling.

With this workshop, we would like to use improvisation theater activities to help hone the academic’s ability to connect directly to their research context and presentation audience. Hopefully, participants in this workshop will learn to be more extemporaneous, and the practice

will transform academics to research, teach, and present confidently and thoroughly.

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