

# Unit 21: Drama Improvisation

<b>Unit code:</b>	<b>D/502/5099</b>
<b>QCF Level 3:</b>	<b>BTEC National</b>
<b>Credit value:</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Guided learning hours:</b>	<b>60</b>

## ● Aim and purpose

This unit invites learners to work on dramatic situations without the initial support of a written text. It allows the free exploration of ideas that can be developed into dramatic form to performance level.

## ● Unit introduction

Being able to improvise will be enormously helpful for anyone wanting to be a performer; however, it is an essential skill for any actor. Not all actors like having to improvise scenes and ideas in their work, but those who can, with speed, wit and ingenuity, find it a hugely important tool in their box of skills. In short, it makes those who are good at it much more employable than those who are not.

Improvisation is great fun to do as well as being one of the best means of finding your way through a scene or into the head of a character. It is the starting point for devised theatre since it allows writers and directors to use their actors' skills to create and develop themes and ideas for plays; it can give drama a definite sense of truth. It is also used widely for role playing in educational and professional training contexts, such as where sensitive issues need to be tackled by coming at them through an imaginary scenario, when learners need to understand what it would be like 'if..'. Improvisation is also vital for storytellers of all kinds, both those who do it for a living and those who just want to entertain their friends by adding a bit of colour to a tale.

This unit will allow learners to explore fully how improvisation can work for an actor, what the techniques are, how to develop from a starting point and how not to come to a grinding halt through embarrassment or lack of ideas. There is an array of methods an actor can use to get over this and the more actors can employ them easily and to good end, the better the drama.

**Learners will be assessed in at least two contrasting improvisations, each lasting a minimum of three minutes, at least one as part of a group.**

## ● Learning outcomes

**On completion of this unit a learner should:**

- 1 Be able to use the skills of improvisation
- 2 Be able to use and develop improvisation
- 3 Be able to perform in improvised drama.

# Unit content

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## 1 Be able to use the skills of improvisation

*Principles:* accepting ideas and making offers; being spontaneous; using silence; recognition; offering self; offering leads; taking risks; success and failure; finding your identity

*Narration:* eg narrative skills, storytelling, using text, text out of context, using previous ideas, lists, associating images, developing characters, word at a time, playwriting

*Status:* changing status; eye contact; body language; spatial awareness; control

## 2 Be able to use and develop improvisation

*Exercises:* eg ice-breakers, trust exercises, observation and concentration games, Theatre Sports, states-of-tension exercises, space, weight and time

*Rehearsal:* exploring text; background; conditions; exploring character; motivation; relationships; physicality; stage action; off-text scenes; situations; exploring themes and issues

## 3 Be able to perform in improvised drama

*Starting points:* eg image, words, character, sound and music, situation, scenario, play or other text, props, costume, mask

*Performance skills:* voice; movement; spatial awareness; solo and ensemble; risk taking; group dynamics and support; common goals

*Audience:* appreciation of audience; appropriateness of improvised drama; communication and spontaneity under performance conditions

## Assessment and grading criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria for a pass grade describe the level of achievement required to pass this unit.

Assessment and grading criteria		
To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:	To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:	To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:
<b>P1</b> demonstrate improvisation techniques to create drama [CT]	<b>M1</b> demonstrate improvisation techniques to create imaginative drama	<b>D1</b> demonstrate improvisation techniques to create inspiring and challenging drama
<b>P2</b> use improvisation to create drama in response to stimuli [CT]	<b>M2</b> use improvisation to explore a range of stimuli to enable characterisation or role development	<b>D2</b> use improvisation imaginatively to explore character, role, text or ideas, showing intuition and courage
<b>P3</b> perform spontaneous or polished improvisation, using appropriate skills of voice, movement and use of space. [EP]	<b>M3</b> perform spontaneous or polished improvisation using appropriate performance skills to engage the audience.	<b>D3</b> perform using improvisation inventively and confidently to create drama that fully engages the audience.

**PLTS:** This summary references where applicable, in the square brackets, the elements of the personal, learning and thinking skills applicable in the pass criteria. It identifies opportunities for learners to demonstrate effective application of the referenced elements of the skills.

Key	IE – independent enquirers	RL – reflective learners	SM – self-managers
	CT – creative thinkers	TW – team workers	EP – effective participators

## Essential guidance for tutors

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### Delivery

This unit can be seen as a foundation for all units that concern acting skills, in particular *Principles of Acting*, *Applying Acting Styles* and *Storytelling for Performance*. Work for this unit can also be used to contribute to *Contemporary Theatre Performance* when dealing with off text work.

This unit will be taught in the studio, and performances that may arise from workshop exercises may be performed there, or on stage. The main thrust of the work will be the exploration of, and mastery of, the principal techniques and skills of improvisation, learning how to take risks both emotionally and physically and then exploring them through working from different stimuli.

Learners will need to appreciate the need for careful warm-up before starting improvisation class, the physical being as important as the cerebral. Trust exercises will be very helpful in learners' confidence building and tutors should encourage the use of comedy – this unit should be fun! Through humour many obstacles will be overcome, such as those of embarrassment and fear of exposure to peers. Many improvised scenes start off being funny, but development can take them to more serious places. This approach helps learners feel comfortable within their group and happy to explore scenes or issues involving difficult subject matter.

An improvisation workshop is not a place where learners just do what they feel like doing; time needs to be taken exploring the techniques through a wide range of methods and using a variety of stimuli. These can be issues, texts, plays, pictures, music, live or recorded performances. Skills honed here will prove more than beneficial for all other performance work undertaken. Used in rehearsal, improvisation can be an effective way into a character, through playing out what may have happened previously, their relationships with other characters; it can help find out how a character might react in a situation and assist in finding how to discern the status or authority of a character. It is tightly linked to naturalistic acting and the rehearsal work of practitioners like Stanislavski and Strasberg, but may also be useful in any other style of drama.

It may be useful to devote time to improvisations that are centred round a specific theme. This allows learners to gain confidence in the subject matter of their work, so they can then experiment with a variety of ideas. It is important that learners are able to work in a variety of group sizes, for example solo work, pairs, small and large groups. Solo work can be catered for via storytelling or developing stand up comedy techniques. This work can then be performed to the rest of the group, offering an opportunity for discussion and analysis. The focus of discussion should concern itself with questions around creative input, fluidity and communication.

When learners have gained confidence in basic improvisation techniques, they can then spend time on rehearsed or polished improvisation. For the purposes of this unit, there is no need to perfect the improvisation towards a final script. Rather the improvised play should be structured so that learners can place their created characters within it and still remain flexible, within that agreed structure. Forum Theatre is particularly useful since it requires a specific focus on the wishes of the audience, and demands flexibility in performance.

The most important improvisation skill that learners must develop is that of offering and accepting; generosity of spirit, acceptance of risk, going where the other actor wants to take the journey with speed and ingenuity will develop thereafter.

Exposure to performance will ensure that these skills are really stretched; whilst polished stage performances are not essential here, it will be highly advantageous for learners to regularly try out their skills on stage, for instance in Theatre Sports.

## Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments.

The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment
Introduction to scope and concept of the unit
<b>Assignment 1: Using Improvisation – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2</b> Ice breakers and trust exercises. Concentration exercises and observation exercises. Movement exercises. Spatial awareness exercises. Introduction to storytelling skills. Preparation of a story (individual learners). Performance of story to group. Group discussion of story performance. Introduction to play text. Study of one scene of play text. Off text improvisation. Response to stimulus. Evaluation of status in improvisation.
<b>Assignment 2: Performing Improvisations – P3, M3, D3</b> Introduction of stimulus 1. Exploration of creative potential of stimulus. Development of improvised play from stimulus 1. Performance of improvised play. Introduction to Forum Theatre. Introduction of stimulus based on a chosen theme or issue 2. Exploration of creative potential of stimulus. Development of improvised play from stimulus 2. Forum performance of improvised play.

## Assessment

For learning outcome 1, evidence is likely to be in the form of tutor and peer observation records. There should be clear reference to the content for this outcome. A selection of video/DVD evidence of a range of sessions should also be made. The evidence should cover a range of activity, from solo work to small groups, incorporating free improvisation and off text work.

Learning outcome 2 will be evidenced by tutor and peer observation records and examples of sessions recorded on video/DVD. There should be reference to a rehearsal process that leads to performance of polished improvisations.

Evidence for learning outcome 3 should be provided through a video/DVD recording of the final performance.

For P1 and P2, learners will be able to involve themselves in improvisation activity, but there is a lack of spontaneity; listening skills will be limited. Status has been partially considered with limited evidence of awareness of others. Characters tend to be simplistic with some experimentation into character type; they will develop along stereotypical lines and learners will not be comfortable going into uncharted territory. Learners will explore the themes or ideas inherent in the stimulus or text but are likely to choose the obvious or the element most likely to 'get a laugh', for instance.

For P3, improvisations may be limited by lack of character development. Work will show some understanding of the performance techniques required to communicate with the audience, although it may be difficult for the audience to truly believe the character. The performance may also lack depth in the subject matter; whilst learners have an idea who or what the role or character is, they may not have worked to find their underlying motives or needs. There will be some idea of where the character or role comes from and where they might be going, but learners may have not fully considered this, particularly in polished work.

For M1 and M2, learners will demonstrate an ability to use improvisation techniques that are appropriate to the work in hand. They will work comfortably with different kinds of stimuli, both spontaneously and in more polished work. Learners will work imaginatively, often going beyond the obvious, or the line that achieves an easy laugh. They will have mastered how to create different levels of status, so that they might play more than one role in a piece and differentiate clearly between them. For M3, learners will use vocal and movement skills that help delineate the character or role. For example, merit learners might explore how to play age or different gender, they might also help others to explore their role, such as through working on the emotional memory for their character. When working with text, merit learners will use off-text exercises successfully, to aid character development. They will work with others in a group towards a holistic end, giving and accepting ideas. In performance, learners will clearly engage the audience, appreciating that their work is made for that audience. The drama will be appropriate and pitched well.

For D1 and D2, learners will demonstrate high levels of sensitivity, both to the stimulus and the needs of the performance. They will be imaginative and take risks in their use of improvisational techniques. There will be a sense that work is never finished, but is always progressing forward. Learners will be happy to explore a wide range of roles and characters. They will work on the background to roles, where work is polished and help others in an ensemble do the same. Their work will relate well to that of their group. For D3, learners will ensure they have mastered the necessary physical skills for a role, such as where a character has props to deal with. They will be happy taking risks. Their vocal skills will be honed so that they can take on a wide range of roles. Working off-text will have obvious purpose and will aid the development of character or circumstance; learners will master their role through their own inventiveness and persistence. In performance, distinction learners will clearly engage their audience, making work that fully persuades their audience of its suitability and success.

## Programme of suggested assignments

The table below shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass, merit and distinction criteria in the assessment and grading grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Edexcel assignments to meet local needs and resources.

Criteria covered	Assignment title	Scenario	Assessment method
P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2	Assignment 1: Using Improvisation	Learners will be given a variety of stimuli to which a variety of improvisation techniques will be applied.  Learners will work solo and in a variety of different sized groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer observation records.</li> <li>Tutor observation records.</li> <li>Examples of recorded material from workshop sessions.</li> </ul>
P3, M3, D3	Assignment 2: Performing Improvisations	Learners will select two contrasting stimuli that can be developed into performance.  One performance will take the form of Forum Theatre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Video/DVD recording of performances.</li> </ul>

## Links to National Occupational Standards, other BTEC units, other BTEC qualifications and other relevant units and qualifications

This unit forms part of the BTEC Performing and Production Arts sector suite. This unit has particular links with the following unit titles in the BTEC Performing and Production Arts suite:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Exploring Acting Skills	Acting Skills and Techniques	Principles of Acting
	Devising Plays	Applying Acting Styles
	The Development of Drama	Contemporary Theatre Performance
		Storytelling for Performance

## Essential resources

This unit requires a suitable studio space.

## Employer engagement and vocational contexts

Working with, or watching performances by, professional practitioners would be a useful method of demonstrating the skills and techniques used in improvisation.

## Indicative reading for learners

### Textbooks

Babbage F – *Augusto Boal* (Routledge, 2004) ISBN 9780415273268

Boal A – *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Routledge, 2002) ISBN 9780415267083

Boal A – *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Pluto Press, 2008) ISBN 9780745328386

Johnstone K – *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Methuen Drama, 1981) ISBN 9780713687019

Johnstone K – *Impro for Storytellers* (Faber and Faber, 1999) ISBN 9780571190997



## Delivery of personal, learning and thinking skills

The table below identifies the opportunities for personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that have been included within the pass assessment criteria of this unit.

Skill	When learners are ...
<b>Creative thinkers</b>	responding to stimuli to create improvised drama
<b>Effective participators</b>	performing an improvised play to a specified audience.

Although PLTS are identified within this unit as an inherent part of the assessment criteria, there are further opportunities to develop a range of PLTS through various approaches to teaching and learning.

Skill	When learners are ...
<b>Independent enquirers</b>	researching ideas for improvised characters
<b>Team workers</b>	cooperating with other learners to create improvised drama.

## ● Functional Skills – Level 2

Skill	When learners are ...
<b>English</b>	
Speaking and listening – make a range of contributions to discussions and make effective presentations in a wide range of contexts	discussing ideas for an improvised play
Reading – compare, select, read and understand texts and use them to gather information, ideas, arguments and opinions	researching information for inclusion in an improvised play.