

Chris Espinosa XYZ -- Artist Statement

Creating something out of nothing but imagination is improvisational theater's most magical quality. As a teaching artist, I have a front-row seat to this spellbinding spectacle. It's always amazing what the students can accomplish in five days because, more often than not, my residency is the first time students are introduced to improvisational theater and performing. Just when I think I know how the show is going to end, the students always seem to find something up their sleeves to surprise their audience.

That "something" is thrilling when a student, armed with only a few suggestions, walks onto an empty stage and conjures a scene out of thin air.

That "something" is profound when a student embraces the spirit of improvisation and makes their self-doubt vanish to reveal their true self.

That "something" is a joyous event when student uses their unique talents and gifts to create an unforgettable moment on stage.

And that "something" is what continues to inspire me and influence my work, even after my almost two decades as a teaching artist. I know what it feels like to enchant an audience through improvisational theater and I that's what I want students to experience. I constantly assess student understanding of my lessons to make sure the students understand so they can accomplish the task at hand to the best of their abilities. Through collaboration, reflection, and performance, I provide the conditions where student can make their own magic on stage. It's always exciting to witness the artistic and educational growth of students. That's my payoff, and that's why I do what I do.

However, becoming a teaching artist who specialized in improvisational theater wasn't my original career path. I did not receive a BA in Theater Arts, nor did I take any drama classes at Texas Tech University. However, in the years since I graduated from college in 1991, I have been a student of improvisation and theater arts in real time in front of a variety of audiences: training with one of the original members of The Groundlings; on stage in the cast of numerous community theater productions; writing/directing my own sketch comedy shows, as a member of three improv comedy groups (two of which I founded); and finally, as a storyteller with a live cotton tail bunny.

In 2002, I wrote a children's book about a robot dog that explores Texas. As a way to promote the book, I created my own style of improvisational theater in which I collaborate with students to improvise a story that would be performed with or without the aid of student volunteers. My improvisational story program had a positive impact in the K-3rd grade classrooms. Many teachers let me know that my methods helped their students write stories. My program wasn't simply entertainment; it was also educational. The improvisational techniques helped students develop ideas, as well as enhance communication skills through elevated word choice. In the end, students realized that writing was as easy speaking their minds. One of those teachers, who had been a 4th grade teacher, understood the potential my one-day program would have in the 4th grade classroom. She suggested that I expand it into a multi-day residency.

I jumped at the chance to empower reluctant writers with the confidence to write because I was well aware of the writing anxiety many students feel. As a child, I never felt prepared to write and it took a long time to

complete my writing assignments. Therefore, I was considered to be a reluctant writer. (I can still be hesitant to write, even as I compose this Artist Statement) Improvisational theater techniques helped me conquer the blank page by motivating me to put pencil to paper and write. That was the catalyst for my 5-day, arts integrated writing residency that has helped thousands of students write hundreds of stories and expository essays. It has also helped improve writing scores on the Texas state-mandated test.

Although I initially fashioned my residency to help with the writing process, improvisational theater is a valuable skill for any subject because it gets the students moving. It transforms the learning process from a passive into an active experience. When you teach students to think on their feet, they will be able to critically think in their seats. In the spring of 2020, I will debut a new arts integrated residency. It's a semester-long, after-school residency that will be a mash-up of multiple arts (improvisational theater and visual arts) and multiple subjects (language arts, math, and science). The end result will be a theatrical production with a public performance in May 2020. This is an idea I have had for a while, but I had difficulty finding a school that was receptive to such an ambitious program. Fortunately, in the course of preparing for the Young Audiences Teaching Credential, I found a school that was eager to use arts integration to expand the reach of the language arts into multiple subjects. I hope to duplicate this program at other campuses.

As I organized my application for the YA Teaching Credential, a pattern emerged in my professional history that shows how a career as an improvisational theater teaching artist was inevitable. And I wouldn't have it any other way. As a teaching artist, I guide students to discover what they can accomplish with nothing but their imaginations. I teach students important improvisational skills that will give them the confidence to face obstacles when life presents a situation where there is no script. Most importantly, I provide a stage for students to stand up and stand out as an individual. Once students learn who they are – when they find their true voice -- they have the power to speak their minds, they have the power to accomplish their goals, and they have to power create -- To create something out of nothing but their imagination.