

Conference Sharings:

Thanks to funding from the Lottery Minister's Discretionary Fund, I was able to attend the 2022 international applied improvisation conference. I was originally to travel to New York for this event in 2020, however, due to COVID that conference was postponed. In 2022 it was the turn of Spain to host. The theme of the conference was "From History to Our Story." It was attended by over 100 delegates from 19 different countries and provided an opportunity for me to meet and build relationships with experts in the field and to hear first hand about latest research and innovative applications of performance as a tool for community development and wellbeing.

This report captures the highlights from three presentations that align with the work of Voice Arts and the communities we work with. (1) the use of applied performance in the combating of ageism (2) Research on how meditation and improvisation activate the brain in a significantly similar way. (3) The use of applied performance in developing competency by engaging the heart in learning.

The use of applied performance in the combating of ageism:

Highlights from a presentation by Jan Verlinden (Belgium)

According to the WHO 50% per people are ageist. The stereotypes they buy into include:

Older people ...

- Are unable to learn.
- Lack creativity
- Have an inevitable decline in cognition
- Don't contribute to society
- Are fragile and should avoid unstructured activity

Ageism is structural within: the advertising industry, popular culture, workplaces, education, media, government. Ageism impacts the way an older person views themselves, erodes solidarity between the generations, limits the vital development and learning that can come from inter-generations collaboration, impacts quality of life.

But here's the good news, information often unreported. Dr Gene Cohen, author of the "The Mature Mind" describes the discovery of unforeseen psychological development late in the life cycle as "untapped wells of creativity and intellectual potential." This untapped potential is buoyed by an inner voice that often says: "If not now, then when? And with an ease that comes from experience "What's the worst that could happen? This gives older people access to "a comfort, a confidence and a courage younger people don't have access to."

A study out of Duke University shows older people use both sides of the brain in a more synchronised way. Older people move to ALL-WHEEL DRIVE. Any activity that optimally uses both sides "Is like chocolate to the brain." The games and exercises of improvisational theatre being just that. We are providing chocolate for the brain. Also from that study, older brains are more emotionally resilient. The aging brain has greater emotional maturity, is more adaptability to change and can have higher levels of well-being.

Ashton Applewhite, the Author of "This Chair Rocks" describes the older brain as having cognitive reserves: the ability to build and maintain extra neurons and connections between them, and the best way to build those reserves is to: challenging the brain, socially engage the brain and move the body. That's our work, with the added benefit of joy, creativity and finding our voice.

Improvisation and Meditation:

Highlights from a presentation by Edwardo Jauregui (Spain / UK)

Depending on who you ask there is a variety of nuanced responses to question: what are the rules (or the pillars) of improvisational theatre, however, most will look something like this:

- Listen
- Be present
- Yes
- And

However, it's hard to listen, there are always distractions and we are always waiting on our turn to speak. Being present is hard, there is always a past or the future pulling on us. Saying yes, and accepting what has been said or done is hard we often want to reject or change. Finally, building with what has been said or done, is also hard, we often want to do our own thing, my way is the only way.

Depending on who you ask there is a variety of nuanced responses to question: what are the rules (or the pillars) of mindfulness and meditation, however, most will look something like this:

- Pay attention (Listen)
- Be in the moment (Be present now)
- Without judgment (Yes)
- Then you can act.

Improvisation is meditation in action and both have the power to elevate our mood and realign our behaviour, however both need to be practiced. When you train 'the muscles' of improvisational theatre you learn how to actively listen, how to focus on what's here right now, how to accept what's happening around you and how to build with that to create a better outcome.

Learning with heart:

Highlights from a presentation by Nina Nakling (Norway)

In this presentation Nina defined competency as knowledge, plus skill, plus heart. Competency is ultimately driven by the heart, by what a person wants. To increase people's competency we can provide access to environments where they can discover the joy of being relational, the joy of giving and actively seeking to be connected and where those competencies become what the heart wants.

We all have a natural instinct to give and this is demonstrated by 'The Christmas Card Rule' If we want to receive Christmas cards, how do we get them? By giving Christmas cards to other people. How do we feel when we receive a Christmas card from someone who has not sent one to us? We feel rubbish and we will likely rush out and send one to that person. This rule proves that: I give in order to receive and applied improvisational performance creates a space for people to discover this.



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How do you create great spaces for people to work, live or socialise in? We can do this by raising the level of engagement, the emotional attachment to the work, to the place, to the people. We are seeking to switch people off autopilot.

The Christmas card rule can then be extended: if I want to feel safe in my workplace or in my community, how do I get that? By making sure other people feel safe around me. Safety is the first thing we lose in life, this is birth. We are always seeking a return to safety. With applied improvisation we seek to create emotional safety for individuals and psychological safety within groups.

**PLAY, PERFORM,
DEVELOP**