

*The following is an excerpt from the book:*

## **Insight Improvisation**

**Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy  
for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

by Joel Gluck, MEd, RDT

*To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.*

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## Facilitating Workshops

*“When I [facilitate a] workshop, I clean myself, meditate. I plan something, but at the workshop I learn to let go. It is just a moment. Sometimes ‘I’ want to do something, but ‘No I’ tells me something. So what I do lately is listen and trust. I clear myself empty.”*

— Sonoko Prow, Thailand

(personal communication, July 19, 2015)

Perhaps even more so than in individual work, the experience of teaching Insight Improvisation to groups can be profoundly moving and gratifying. After more than 17 years of teaching these programs world-wide, I continue to be surprised and moved by what’s possible: personal breakthroughs, penetrating insights, laughter, tears, mutual support and peer coaching, and self-discovery on every level. I feel tremendously lucky when I get to offer this work; as facilitator I have the privilege to help provide a safe environment for participants to reveal their most vulnerable and authentic selves to one another.

The purpose of the chapter is two-fold: first, to share what I know about the design, facilitation, and teaching of Insight Improvisation workshops; and second, to convey some of the experiences I’ve had teaching this work in the US and internationally.

This chapter is for those who've learned and practiced Insight Improvisation and would like to teach it to others, as well as for creative arts therapists, theater artists, workshop leaders, meditators, and others who would like to draw on their own unique mixture of skills and experience to design and lead workshops of their own, in their own countries and internationally.

<b>Facilitating Workshops</b>	
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### **Why Teach Insight Improvisation?**

If I had to choose one pursuit in life, I would travel the planet sleeping on sofas and teaching Insight Improv.

Why?

There's something about the conditions created in these workshops that allows participants to go to a deeply personal, and at the same time creative place. If run well and if the participants are open, what shines through in an Insight Improv workshop is participants' authenticity and vulnerability, their uniqueness, who they are at their best—body, voice, mind, emotions, imagination all aligned, open, and fully expressed.

From a broader perspective, I see time and again in these workshops the potential we all have to live lives more free of suffering—lives of joy, presence, meaning, and connection.

The level of mutual support in these programs is particularly inspiring. Over the course of the four-day “Life Drama” program, for example (described below in the section on Standard Programs), individuals can go from being strangers, to uninhibitedly playing and improvising together, to directing one another in psychodramas, to meditating and doing authentic movement together, to creatively and courageously exploring their truths in the presence of one another through psolodrama. It is awe-inspiring to sit at one end of a large hall in Bangkok or Beijing or Kolkata or Seoul and see 10 or 20 pairs of participants practicing psolodrama together, one person witnessing the other's spontaneous unfolding of their life—the witness observing with concentration and caring, the psoloist improvising with vulnerability and creative abandon.

It is important to say here that not every moment of every workshop is like this. A lot depends on the group, the facilitator, having a supportive environment, etc. And Insight Improvisation is not entirely unique in this way: there are many forms of drama therapy and creative arts therapy that invite a similar depth of creative exploration.

For me, it is the personal transformations individuals can undergo that are perhaps the most moving. In one program, in Thailand, a woman in her late thirties asked to speak with me after the first day. She was very quiet, and looked depressed and tired. She began to cry, saying that the workshop was bringing up for her the grief of losing a child (a miscarriage, the latest of several she'd had). At home, she felt unable to talk about it with her husband and mother-in-law, who both kept telling her to just get over it and move on. She hid her tears, and sometimes cried alone in a bedroom, so that her five-year old son would not know that she was sad; she felt ashamed and guilty that she might be negatively affecting him. Through our conversation, and then using the psychodrama exercises the following day, she was able to express herself more fully, allowing herself to feel and express her grief vocally and physically. She returned the second weekend feeling a bit better. And by the end of that weekend—having enacted her own psolodramas and witnessed others'—she had made a noticeable shift. She looked different—happy, confident, and at peace—and spoke to the group with gratitude about what the experience and their support had meant to her.

### **Qualifications for Instructors**

A teacher of Insight Improvisation combines knowledge and experience with an intention and commitment to be of service, and is proficient in five main areas of expertise:

**I. Hands-on understanding of Insight Improvisation concepts, practices, and exercises**, including meditation and active meditation; theater and improvisation; and drama therapy, psychodrama, and psolodrama structures. This means not only reading

this book but more importantly taking these exercises “into the studio” with a friend/peer or small group to try out the variations, experiment, and explore; using them individually with clients if one is a therapist; and incorporating practices such as meditation, authentic movement, and “psolodrama alone” into one’s daily, weekly, and monthly schedule.

**II. A depth of knowledge in meditation and experience teaching it.** This includes actively learning and reading about meditation, listening to dharma talks, attending retreats, having one’s own daily sitting practice, etc. It is also helpful to gain experience teaching meditation in a variety of contexts, e.g. to children, seniors, prison inmates, etc. Personal understanding of meditative awareness—as well as the ability to model mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—lends credibility to the facilitator’s teaching.

**III. A background in theater/performance.** Training and onstage experience in acting and its core skills—the expressive use of the body and voice; the importance of breathing and relaxation; the principles of improvisation; what it means to commit fully to making a gesture, delivering a line of text, pursuing an intention, playing a role, etc.—are all vital. In addition to classical theater training, experience with different forms of movement improvisation, improvisational singing, non-comedic forms of improvisation, self-revelatory theater, and experimental theater, is recommended, as is studying/training with a wide range of teachers and performing with different kinds of theater groups (scripted and improvisational).

**IV. Drama therapy/psychodrama training.** A background in drama therapy or psychodrama—or to be actively studying and practicing those techniques—is vital to being a good teacher of Insight Improv. Although one is not formally in the role of

“therapist” in an Insight Improvisation workshop, quite often one must draw upon therapeutic knowledge/experience, e.g. when conducting the empty chair exercise, leading a psychodrama, helping a workshop participant deal with overwhelming feelings in the course of doing an exercise, or answering challenging questions. This chapter offers some guidance with regard to handling challenging situations, but confidence and credibility come from training with many different teachers in a wide range of drama therapy and psychodrama techniques, and practicing those approaches both in workshop settings and with actual clients.

**V. Experience as a facilitator.** A background in experiential training with groups—e.g. understanding how to introduce a program and oneself, how to set the tone for a program as well as establish ground rules, how to conduct whole group as well as pair and small-group activities, best approaches when debriefing an exercise, how to manage questions, challenges, resistance, etc.—is all very helpful. This chapter describes a range of facilitation practices that have proven useful in Insight Improvisation programs; however, nothing beats actual experience: it helps to have attended many workshops and led many workshops before teaching Insight Improv.

*(See “Additional Resources” at the end of this chapter, for more about training in these areas of expertise.)*

## **Standard and Custom Programs**

Although there isn’t a single way to deliver an Insight Improvisation workshop, over the years I have developed a set of standard curricula; these agendas can be found in “Appendix C: Sample Agendas for Group Work.” One can also design one’s own

programs using the concepts and exercises in this book to meet the needs of different populations, groups, and specific teams, or to combine Insight Improv with other types of experiential work.

### Standard Programs

The first Insight Improvisation programs, which I offered to groups in 1999 in Cambridge and Charlemont, MA (the latter at Jean-Claude van Itallie's Shantigar workshop center), were focused on the intersection of theater and meditation, drawing on the exercises which can be found in Part II of this book. That workshop is now called **"Insight Improvisation: Freedom in Performance,"** typically a two- to three-day program, modules of which can also be delivered standalone or as a series of classes or workshops.

As I trained as a drama therapist, developing psolodrama as a practice, and beginning to teach it to others, my first attempts were to train others over a single weekend, which usually felt too rushed. What has evolved over time is a four-day program—entitled **"Life Drama"**—which can be led contiguously or over two weekends. **"Life Drama, Part I—An Introduction to Drama Therapy & Psychodrama,"** is just that—it does not contain any Insight Improvisation exercises, but lays the groundwork for what's to come by introducing fundamental concepts such as improvisational play, sociodrama, the empty chair, role reversal, the psychodramatic roles, the skills of the psychodrama director, the psychodramatic sharing process, and more. This is followed by **"Life Drama, Part II—Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama,"** a two-day program that introduces the three types of meditative awareness and corresponding types of meditation , the entryway practices including authentic

movement, the role of the witness and the sharing process, and psolodrama itself, as well as sung psolodrama.

Although some of the material in Part I of this book—including meditation, authentic movement, and shared vipassana—is included in the psolodrama program above, there is not enough time to cover these practices in depth. In addition, there are many more exercises in Part I of this book that are both fun and rewarding to explore. For that reason I have created a two-day program, **“Insight Improvisation: Meditation & Active Meditation,”** also described in Appendix C.

### Custom Programs

Custom programs can be created using Insight Improvisation techniques and ideas to meet the special needs of different groups, teams, and special populations.

In December 2004, about five weeks before I was due to visit Bangkok for the first time, the Indian Ocean tsunami hit, killing many along the Andaman coast in southern Thailand, and leaving thousands displaced, homeless, and traumatized, including children and teens. When I arrived in Thailand, I tried to find some way to help and was asked by the Rajanukul Institute, Thailand’s largest children’s hospital, to teach a workshop on the use of experiential techniques for working with children after a disaster. I reached out to the drama therapy community as well as colleagues in Boston for input, and created a workshop for clinicians which combined information about PTSD, warm-ups and games, theater-based exercises such as storytelling, and ways of introducing meditation to kids. For the three-hour workshop, Rajanukul brought together mental health workers from throughout Bangkok—from NGO’s and hospitals—who would later be traveling to the tsunami region. Participants enjoyed the playful exercises

and had many questions about how to apply them. This experience inspired me to go to the tsunami region myself soon after, where a colleague and I used these techniques, as well as psychodrama and playback theater, with tsunami survivors. (For a more detailed recounting of this experience, see Gluck, 2012. More thoughts about using Insight Improvisation with children can be found in the final chapter of this book.)

Other potential audiences for custom programs include therapists, couples, leaders, and organizational teams, as well as populations suffering from specific thought/emotional/behavioral patterns, such as those with borderline personality disorder (BPD). One of my internships when studying to be a therapist was using psychodrama along with Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to treat young people with BPD. Insight Improvisation might work well in this setting as it combines the teaching of mindfulness with psychodramatic tools.

## **Principles of Curriculum Design**

When putting together an Insight Improv program or any experiential program, there are certain principles that when adhered to help create a design that is most effective for the individuals attending and for the group as a whole. These principles progress from the highest level view (“who is the audience and what do I want them to leave with?”), to designing the broad arc of the program, to the details of thinking about how each module and exercise will be introduced, led, and discussed.

(Much has been written about the importance and benefits of experiential training over lecture and passive learning. I will assume here the reader understands why one should lead workshops rather than deliver lectures on Insight Improv!)

## Audience, Goal, and Benefit

As my colleague Pat Dougan likes to say, before any presentation or meeting we need to think about the Audience, the Goal, and the Benefit: who is coming, what are our objectives, and what will the audience take away?

**Audience.** Sometimes we know a great deal about the audience—it may be a particular team or a special population we’re designing the program for. Other times, as with a public open-enrollment program, we may know little or nothing in advance about the group. Good program design can help address this latter problem. One way is with pre-work: I can have my attendees answer a brief questionnaire about their background, why they’re attending, and what they hope to get out of the program. Alternatively, I can use techniques early in the workshop to get to know the group better. For example, with a large group, I typically begin “Life Drama, Part I” with sociometry, asking them to split into subgroups based on what their profession is, how they feel today, why they decided to come to the workshop, etc. To get a better sense of the experience level in the group, I may ask them to rate their depth of knowledge/experience in theater and in therapy, using spectrograms to give a visual sense of this in the room. To go a little deeper, I approach individuals during these exercises to briefly “interview” them with the whole group listening—to find out why they chose the particular group or spot on the spectrum that they did.

**Goal.** In “An Introduction to Drama Therapy & Psychodrama” (“Life Drama, Part I”), the main goal is to equip participants with the basic tools of drama therapy and psychodrama, so that by the end of the program they can actually direct a small psychodrama. A secondary goal is to plant seeds for “Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama”

(“Life Drama, Part II”). Participants in Part I learn about the psychodramatic roles, the shape of an effective psychodrama, and the skills of the director and thus are more readily able to grasp how psolodrama works when taking Part II. In Part II, the goal is to train participants in the practice of psolodrama and all its constituent skills. These include meditation and the types of meditative awareness, authentic movement and the entryway progression, use of the psychodramatic roles, the types of sharing that witnesses can engage in, etc. By the end they should feel confident in not only practicing psolodrama but also in being a witness for others. Ideally, many will leave the program able to go out and teach psolodrama to friends and peers and to practice with them.

**Benefit.** I think about the potential benefits to participants on a number of different levels. There is the innermost level of **personal development**: the participant can discover something new about themselves, have a new insight, express a truth about themselves they have never expressed before (either at all or never before with a group of people), learn to be less inhibited, and/or discover his own creative or expressive potential. In some cases, the personal development begun in the workshop can have a positive effect on the participant’s life, helping him open up to his family, consider leaving a job he is unhappy with, begin meditating regularly, etc. A second level of benefit is **knowledge**: participants leave with some understanding of the concepts taught in the program, the exercises, meditation practices, types of awareness, etc. And finally there is the benefit of **application** with others: how a participant can take the ideas and exercises from the program and apply them with individuals and groups. Not only may therapists, teachers, and coaches gain this benefit, but also anyone who wants to teach a

friend or family member or get together with another participant and practice these techniques.

### **Conceptual, Experiential, and Emotional Arcs**

The arc of a program can be visualized as three intertwined threads:

- (1) **The concepts** introduced
- (2) **The experiential activities** that help illuminate those ideas and apply them concretely
- (3) **The mental/physical/emotional journey** of participants as they encounter those concepts and experiences

There are several principles associated with designing an effective and satisfying program arc:

**Developmental Progression.** Exercises and ideas progress from basic to sophisticated, e.g., from warm-ups and improv games to exercises that require not only autonomy but also leadership, such as directing one's own small group in a psychodrama. In the full "Life Drama" program the ultimate aim is to have the participant take greater ownership of their developmental journey—in a sense they are progressing toward being their own therapist, having insights of their own as they create their own psolodramas.

**Balancing Horizontal & Vertical.** The best workshops give the feeling of everyone being on a journey together in which every step of that journey is itself a worthwhile, rich exploration, while at the same time there is a clear destination. Parallel to van Itallie's ideas about storytelling (1997), the horizontal movement through a workshop is how it

progresses and builds toward its end-point, and the vertical is how it slows down to examine more deeply a particularly idea or experience, exploring it thoroughly as if there were all the time in the world—as if that one activity were the entire program. From a design standpoint, this means that every idea and exercise introduced should be rich enough to warrant such exploration.

**Variety of Learning Styles.** A good agenda varies the mode/approach from exercise to exercise and module to module—for example, alternating meditations with more active exercises—and appeals to different learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, as well as cognitive, affective, and physiological.

### **Empathy and Clarity**

As much as possible, as I design a program, I am exercising empathy, putting myself in the shoes of the participant as I think about how the different modules are strung together, how the exercises flow in each module, how I will segue from exercise to exercise, when and how to introduce new ideas and terminology along the way, etc. At the same time, clarity and logic are key because the danger in an experiential program is that participants become lost in the experience, wondering “why are we doing this?” but being unable to articulate that question as exercises blur by. A good experiential program balances depth of experience (emotional, physical, imaginative) while maintaining intellectual clarity as to why and how we are working.

**Modular structure.** Organizing the program into modules groups the material thematically and helps the facilitator manage time. For example, each morning and afternoon of “Life Drama” is a single module that focuses on a few overarching ideas.

Modules are comprised of one or more exercises, with key concepts introduced in support of the active work.

**Arc of an Exercise.** A typical exercise has a segue/introduction (including, if needed, a demonstration of the exercise), then the exercise itself, and then a debrief. This is parallel to the psychodramatic process (described by Moreno) of Warm-up, Action Phase, Sharing, and Warm-Down.

> **The Introduction** to an exercise provides a segue from whatever came before, and says enough to establish credibility and the rationale for the activity—explaining where we’re going and why—without saying too much; it’s best to maintain a little mystery and keep an introduction as succinct as possible. There are usually two parts to the intro: the conceptual introduction or rationale, and the initial instructions for the exercise. If a demonstration is needed, it’s also good to build a little extra time in for Q&A—a good demonstration will elicit questions and comments.

> **The Exercise Itself** is ideally active, experiential, different from what came before but building on prior skills and adding new ones. It should stretch the group, but not beyond its limits. The best exercises use the whole body and whole voice, and require no props or advance preparation. They can range from creative, playful, and improvisational, to profound, personal, and transformational—and the very best exercises are both fun *and* deep.

Skillful use of repetition is important—human beings learn best not by seeing something once, but by encountering the concept multiple times in different forms and contexts. For this reason, exercises in Insight Improvisation programs tend to be part of a multi-stage progression. Typically, the first stage introduces the new idea to the group as

a whole; the second stage then invites participants to work with that concept or technique by themselves in pairs or small teams. When introducing meditation—e.g. *samadhi*, *vipassana*, or *metta*—each module is structured to introduce the “pure” form first (sitting in silence, with the facilitator providing verbal guidance), and then to take type of awareness into a more active meditation (e.g., authentic movement, shared vipassana, or *metta* dialogue in pairs), and finally to apply the underlying concept—mindfulness, choicelessness, or lovingkindness—more broadly in the workshop as a whole (e.g. how the soloist and witness can each treat their roles in psolodrama as forms of meditation).

**> Structuring Debriefs.** It is usually best to debrief in pairs (or small groups) before having individuals share with the whole group. In this way everyone gets to develop and speak their thoughts before sharing with the whole group. This leads to a higher quality debrief with the whole group, and encourages those who are a little more shy or less verbal to share their experience. (A skilled facilitator will also explicitly draw out the quieter participants in a group—more on this below.) Well-designed debriefs tend to begin with general questions and then progress to more specific ones, for example:

⇒ *What did you experience in this exercise?*

⇒ *What surprised you? What did you learn?*

⇒ *What was most challenging for you?*

⇒ Specific questions about details of the exercise, e.g.: *Were you able to make use of the director, double, and audience roles—and if so, which ones, and what was the effect?*

⇒ *What are one or two insights or learnings you can take from this exercise and apply going forward?*

⇒ *What questions do you have?*

For some exercises, such as psychodrama, authentic movement (as well as the other entryway exercises), and psolodrama, the debrief is preceded by a sharing process—either the group sharing with the protagonist of the psychodrama, or the mover or psoloist sharing with the witness after their psolodrama and vice versa. This sharing process can then be followed by a group debrief, which can include sharing the learnings from the exercise as well as questions for the facilitator. This two-stage process preserves the safe container of the exercise in the sharing process, inviting an expression of feelings, personal reflections, and insights, while also offering a chance in the debrief to take a step back to reflect on the process as a whole, the mechanics of it, why certain choices were made, etc. Because this sharing plus debriefing process is key to the effectiveness of the exercises it is used in, it is vital to educate participants in good sharing practices beforehand—for the group, in psychodrama, and for the witnesses, in exercises such as authentic movement and psolodrama.

*(See the relevant chapters in Part III of this book for best practices in witnessing and sharing.)*

**Closure.** At the end of each module or day of the program, the facilitator can build in time for reflection and questions, to help ground participants' experiential learning, both in the concepts being taught as well as in practical, real-world implications for the work. In addition, the program itself ideally ends with activities to help provide a satisfying sense of closure. One example: standing in a circle, have each participant share a word or phrase expressing one learning or one feeling they are taking from the day (or from the program). With a larger group, and given more time at the end of a two- or four-

day program, I will sometimes give a fun assignment—before the closing circle—for each participant to go visit three other participants in order to acknowledge them for the difference they made in their workshop experience. I also often end a program by having participants hold hands and take a bow together as a way to acknowledge the good work of the group; or breathe, hum, and sing notes together (similar to the Chords exercise in the “Singing” chapter in Part II of this book), ending with a final chord in harmony.

### **The Importance of Warming Up**

As Moreno identified, proper warm up is essential. If a group is well warmed up, they can jump in and do almost anything. A group not warmed up for an exercise may resist it and will likely not have as deep, thorough, or satisfying an experience.

An aware facilitator can tell if a group is not warmed up and can add an activity spontaneously to help warm them up. But it’s even better to think things through in advance and include warm-ups in the program design.

A good warm-up for an exercise anticipates where a participant will need to be—physically, vocally, mentally, and emotionally—and helps move them toward that state.

**Arriving in the space and becoming present.** In most Insight Improvisation programs, I encourage participants to begin as soon as they arrive—even before the official start time—by finding a spot on the floor, closing their eyes, moving, stretching, and following their bodies. I then lead the group through a kind of guided authentic movement, inviting them to notice what’s coming in through the different sense doors, to be present to the texture of the floor, the smell of the air, how their body feels, and to notice specific bodily sensations, sounds, etc. Depending on the agenda, I may continue

this warm-up progression by doing a little sitting meditation with group, then some silent authentic movement (in which the group moves and I witness), and, finally, having them move with a partner in The Three States. This then flows quite naturally into a pair check-in with their movement partner.

**Checking in.** One of the best ways to warm up near the beginning of a program (or in any meeting, in fact), is to check in. This not only gets participants to speak and share personally, it also provides helpful information to the facilitator about the group. With a small group, say, eight or fewer, I like to go around the circle, asking each person to share their name, a brief self-introduction (one sentence), how they are feeling in a word or phrase, and what brought them to the workshop (in a sentence). It's important to keep the check-in brief so that everyone stays engaged. Depending on the type of workshop it is, rather than go around the circle, I might ask the person who just finished to throw an invisible ball to someone else, inviting them to go next—this helps keep everyone more alert and listening, and simply makes the check-in more fun. For a shy group, if we have the time, I might first ask them all to “practice” their check-in with the person next to them before we hear from individuals. This pair check-in also works well coming out of a warm-up activity in pairs, such as The Three States, or Metta Dialogue.

In a large group, I usually begin with sociometry (described above). Then I'll have participants pair up to answer similar check-in questions to those I use in a small group. If there's time, I might invite a few people to share their check-in with everybody, just so we can hear a few examples of how people are feeling and why they are attending.

**Checking in more deeply.** Early in the development of training programs for psolodrama, I began to sense that due to the compact schedule, and the fact that early

exercises in the entryway progression (authentic movement, shared vipassana, and role stream) were not always prompting participants to share in a vulnerable way, more of a warm-up was needed to prepare the group to venture toward psolodrama, one that would invite participants to share more truthfully about their lives. Out of this necessity, the **Deeper Check-in** was born.

In the Deeper Check-in, one person at a time—the protagonist for that round—lies on his back (if it's a hard floor, it nice to use a blanket or cushions to help them be more comfortable). The rest of the group sits on the floor or cushions around the protagonist. Before the round begins, the protagonist can say whether he is open to contact from the group. If he would like contact, group members place their hands on the protagonist's body: arms, legs, head, feet, etc. (protagonist can say what is best for him and the firmness of contact he would like). The protagonist closes his eyes, takes a moment of silence, and then answers two questions—both extensions of or deeper versions of questions asked in the initial check-in (“how are you feeling ?” and “what brings you here?”):

1. **How are you feeling right now *in your life*?** What's bugging you, that you wish to clear, about work, life, relationships, family, etc.? Say whatever you need to say to be fully present.
2. **What do you need right now *in your life*?** What's next for you on your personal path of growth? What are your hopes, dreams, needs, desires for your life right now?

The protagonist ends his round by taking a moment of silence, slowly rising, making eye contact with the group, and then rejoining the group. There is a brief

transition where group members can stretch and relax. Then the next person lies down in the center.

A few additional guidelines for the group:

“Try not to plan in advance what you will say. As you witness others, notice these thoughts and let them go. Instead, when it’s your turn, trust the spontaneity of the exercise—follow your feelings. Answer each question from your heart and gut, as truthfully as you can, without censoring. It’s OK to look bad, to be messy, to cry. Discover what wants to come up. Say what is most important to say.”

“When you are a witness, your purpose is to support the protagonist. It helps to treat the exercise like a meditation, by practicing mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness. Bring your mindful awareness back to the protagonist whenever you are distracted or tired; practice openness by bringing an attitude of non-judgment and support no matter what the protagonist shares or how they share it; and actively bring your lovingkindness and caring to the protagonist, both through the quality of physical contact as well as by empathizing with whatever feelings arise.”

Because the Deeper Check-in involves lots of sitting and not much movement, I will often precede the exercise by leading the group in a walking meditation together (forming a line, and leading the group in slow walking, with the aim of relaxing the body and returning the mind to the present). It is also possible to lead another physical warm-up mid-way through the Deeper Check-in if it begins to feel too long. And it helps to remind the witnesses about bringing their mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness throughout.

Although the Deeper Check-in was originally designed for a small group, I have led it in large groups by demonstrating it myself, then doing the exercise with one or two participants while the whole group witnesses, and then splitting into small teams to give everyone a chance to try it. Timing in this exercise is important, especially for a larger group; use a timer and limit each protagonist to three minutes of sharing, if small groups are working in parallel.

After the exercise, spend a few minutes debriefing in small groups and as a whole. One discovery often shared afterward: “It felt good to realize I am not alone.” By sharing their truth—their imperfection, brokenness, or pain—and hearing others do the same, participants feel less isolated in their suffering and begin to bond as a group. And because they feel less alone, and have begun to trust the others a bit more, it helps them open up in subsequent exercises.

**Other ways of getting to know one another.** Over time, I have found that the Deeper Check-in, powerful as it is, can sometimes take too long, so I have looked for other ways to provide more personal check-in opportunities, especially with larger groups. An alternative approach is to have pairs share “three issues or challenges they are facing in their lives.” The best time to do this is over lunch; not only do pairs of participants get to break bread together as they chat, but by dialoguing over lunch, time is saved for the main experiential activities. This is a great way to warm up many things: connection, empathy, caring for the other, feeling safe with the other, feeling this person has supportive intentions toward me and can be my witness, as well as—ideally—warming up my willingness to be vulnerable and share real issues with this person, both during my drama and in the sharing process afterward.

(A shorter version of this exercise can be led during the program, for example as a brief warm-up before introducing group psychodrama and asking for volunteer protagonists. I will sometimes have participants share one issue or challenge with three different partners, but reduce the time provided in each round: at first they have three minutes to share the issue/challenge, then 30 seconds to share it with another person, and finally just one sentence to share it with a third person. Afterward, I find participants are more readily able to sum up their issue succinctly and powerfully during the psychodrama selection process.)

A related type of partner dialogue is to have participants meet in pairs to share three stories—three significant moments—from their lives. This is a great lunch activity to do on the first day of a program because it invites participants get to know one another better in a fun and engaging way. I suggest that participants tell stories they rarely or never have told before; brainstorm examples of “classic” significant moments (e.g. getting married, death of a loved one, birth of a child, etc.); and I underscore that the exercise is confidential—I will not be asking pairs to report back on the stories afterward.

**Energizers.** Sometimes what’s needed is not an intimate dialogue, but just the opposite: a chance to get physical, move around, create energy, and laugh together. Although I may note an apt moment for an energizer in my written agenda, I also throw in fun physical activities in the midst of a workshop, such as dancing to music in a playful way (linking arms with different partners and gently spinning around), sending “HA!” and a clap around the circle (and similar theater games), a group massage standing in a circle (each person turning to their right to massage the shoulders of the next person),

and whatever else I can think of. I make sure to jump in first and participate fully in everything myself, so the group sees that it's OK to let go and look silly.

## Principles of Facilitation

A facilitator of Insight Improvisation programs plays many roles, including host, presenter, demonstrator, traffic cop, coach, therapist, meditation leader, and more.

Although this chapter cannot provide a complete guide to the art of facilitation, what follows is a brief guide to what I personally have found most helpful to keep in mind when facilitating Insight Improv workshops.

### Being Prepared

So much of the work of a facilitator is simply being prepared and showing up. If I prepare well and show up on time (that is, be there early, so I have plenty of time to arrive, set up, and greet others), there is a higher likelihood the program will be successful.

Preparation consists of a few things:

**Initial Planning.** Months in advance, I have thorough discussions with the organizer or host about the potential audience for the program, the goals of the program and what topics it should include, the venue and logistical requirements, budget, publicity, pre-work/reading/questions for participants, etc. (See “Appendix B: Sample Logistics for Group Programs” for details.) If *I* am the organizer/host, then I create an action plan with deadlines so that I'm not scrambling to find a venue or participants at the last minute.

Regarding the location, the quality and size of the space matters. For a typical Insight Improvisation workshop, an empty space with a clean floor that participants can roll around on is essential (a studio with a wooden dance floor is perfect; a clean, carpeted floor is also fine). Each participant ideally has 30 square feet within which to work; for a group of 12 this is 360 sq. ft., rounding up to roughly 20 by 20 feet; for a group of 40, it would mean a space of 1200 square feet, or about 30 by 40 feet. I usually request a small table set up at one end of the room for my materials, surrounded on each side by a flipchart pad on an easel stand if I anticipate using charts (I'll typically use flipcharts in non-English speaking countries to help clarify the concepts being taught; more about teaching overseas later in this chapter).

**Logistics and Participants.** As the program approaches, it's vital to review the logistics in advance, to be clear on timing, location, and other details, as well as any information about the participants, including any pre-work questions they answered.

**Agenda.** Even if it is an agenda I've led many times before, it helps to review it and modify it as necessary for the group I'll be working with, incorporating any learnings from previous programs. A good preparation step is to create a high-level outline of the agenda, with timing, that fits on a single page, a summary one can glance at during the program.

**Materials.** There are a few basic things I always bring to workshops, tools of the trade for facilitators: a travel clock as many spaces lack a wall clock; Tibetan prayer bells that can be rung to get a group's attention (for a very large group doing a noisy activity, I sometimes ring them into a microphone); music player and portable speakers; flipchart markers in an assortment of colors; masking tape or blue painter's tape to put up

flipcharts. If I have charts from a prior program, I bring them along, either folded up or rolled up in a tube.

### Living the Work

As a facilitator, am I just espousing ideas, beliefs, and practices, or am I living them and practicing them myself? It's helpful to remind myself of my intention before leading a program.

I try to send clear signals from the opening moments of the workshop that although I am the leader, **I am also a participant**. Right from the start I'm on the floor moving with participants as I lead a mindful movement and stretching warm-up. When I lead a meditation, I am also meditating. As often as I can throughout the program, when demonstrating an exercise, I actually *do* the exercise, in an authentic and vulnerable way, drawing upon personal material as appropriate. By modeling vulnerability, I try to create a space where participants feel it is OK for *them* to be vulnerable and share personally.

In Insight Improv we are specifically teaching about the benefits of cultivating mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness. The facilitator must practice and embody these kinds of awareness in their own behavior:

**Mindfulness.** As a facilitator, am I present, undistracted, relaxed, centered? Like Sonoko, whose writing appears at the beginning of this chapter, can I empty myself, taking the time to meditate when I awaken that morning, or in my preparation before the program? Once I arrive in the space, or anytime during the program, can I notice if I am tense, and take a deep breath to return to the here and now?

Being present may be a particular challenge when participants are doing pair or small group work. Can I stay present—not looking at the agenda or my phone (or in international programs, chatting with the translator)—but instead stay focused on participants’ work? If I am truly living the work, I will use opportunities to witness during the program as mini-meditations, bringing my awareness back to the participants as the objects of my meditation.

**Choicelessness** includes qualities of openness and acceptance. Can I accept what is happening in the workshop, especially those things I do not like? A participant expressing an opinion I do not agree with, someone suddenly leaving the room, a technical or logistical problem—all of these present opportunities to slow down, notice my own aversion, and practice nonreactivity, rather than jump to take action or say something rash. Can I take a breath, pause, and *respond*—rather than *react*?

**Lovingkindness.** It should go without saying that the facilitator takes an attitude of lovingkindness toward their participants. And yet—what about the participant who is driving you crazy (e.g. with resistance, irritating questions, annoying habits)? How can you send that person *metta* and think about what action to take to connect with them skillfully—or sometimes choose to take no action. (More on working with difficult participants appears below.) Also, how are you treating each person you come in contact with: workshop organizers, translators, center staff, audiovisual support, cleaning staff? Ideally, connect in a caring way with each person you meet, and treat them as equals. Be a contribution to their day. Smile!

## The Relationship is Everything

*They may forget what you said — but they will never forget how you made them feel.*

— Carl W. Buehner

Facilitating is a big job, there's a lot to juggle, and the facilitator can get tense. I find this often happens to me at the beginning of a program, when I'm rushing to get ready. *Am I all set up and ready? Everything in place? Oh, the participants are arriving! Who are these strange people!?*

This tension is due to my being overly focused on myself and my agenda, rather than other people. That's a shame, because the entire purpose of the workshop is to serve them.

What helps:

1. **Calm down, relax, breathe.** Return to your own center. Smile! As Thich

Nhat Hanh writes (1991, p. 16):

*Breathing in, I calm my body*

*Breathing out, I smile*

*Dwelling in the present moment*

*I know this is a wonderful moment.*

2. **Reach out!** Go right up to people, shake their hands, smile, make eye contact, introduce yourself, learn their name.

It may take a while to learn their names—that's OK. But try to learn everyone's name if possible early in a program—it makes a big difference. Using a person's name sends a caring message. (For large programs name tags are great—so too for programs in other countries where names may be harder to remember.)

During the program, look for ways to put the participants' needs first. You are in service to them, while also balancing the needs of individuals with what's best for the group. Examples:

**Be flexible with breaks.** Let them determine (within reason) when breaks occur and the length of breaks. Don't be upset or overly strict if someone needs to leave the room; flexibility is key.

**Be open to questions.** Try to answer every question thoroughly, ideally when asked, rather than putting it off until later. (One exception: if a participant asks "why are we doing this exercise" before the exercise has started, it is sometimes helpful to say "there are several reasons we're doing this exercise. But rather than explain in advance, I'd like you to experience it for yourself so *you* can discover why we are doing it. Afterward we will discuss why we did it. Does that sound OK to you?") Make yourself available, either over lunch or at the end of the day, to answer further questions. If someone needs additional coaching or help, make the time to spend with them.

**Give feedback skillfully.** Be very liberal in the use of endorsement, but make sure it's authentic and specific; don't just say "good job" or flatter in an empty way. Identify what they did well and say it. If you need to give someone negative feedback about a disruptive behavior, it's usually best to chat with them

privately, during a break. Be careful not to make someone look bad in front of the group; chances are they will not accept the feedback.

**Don't be afraid to apologize.** If you do or say something that you fear may have hurt someone's feelings, don't be afraid to approach them during a break and apologize. Over the course of teaching hundreds of workshops (both in the corporate and therapy worlds), I have had to do this many times. It is always scary and/or awkward to do, yet I am always amazed at the positive outcome—often the two of us leave the interaction feeling much closer. And I am often better informed about them and their issues and sensitivities.

**Intentionally build relationship.** Get to know participants throughout the program, not only during exercises and discussions, but over breaks and meals. If lunch is not a working lunch, invite those who are interested to join you at your table for Q&A. You can also invite them to join you for dinner after the program, as a group, to chat, to ask questions, and for you to learn about them and their lives. Be open to learning new things yourself, and to making new friends.

**Be nice to *everyone*.** Not just the participants. (See the section on lovingkindness, above.)

### **Creating the Safe Container**

A safe, clear, strong container is needed to practice Insight Improvisation. This is especially true for the therapeutic aspects of the work, in which participants tap into their most vulnerable selves. Key elements of that safe container include communicating guidelines in advance; establishing ground rules at the start of the program; introducing

and leading exercises with clarity; and having a compassionate but firm response to strong emotions or to resistance—both for the individual concerned and for the group.

**Communicating guidelines** in advance regarding who can attend the program is an important first step in creating a safe container. There are several guidelines I like to communicate before any Insight Improvisation program; these are especially important for programs of a therapeutic nature:

- **Attendance.** “In order to help create a safe therapeutic container, participants are asked to attend only if they can be present for the entire program.”
- **Age.** “This program is appropriate for ages 21 and older.”
- **Ego strength/boundaries.** “This workshop, although therapeutic in nature, is not a psychotherapy group. Participants must have the ability to hold and support their own emotional process.”

Note that the last guideline is perhaps the most important but the most difficult for some to follow. Those who lack ego strength or personal boundaries—e.g., who suffer from Axis I or II disorders, addiction, trauma, etc.—may be unclear whether they meet the guideline, or knowing that they do not, wish to attend anyway, to alleviate their suffering. Ideally, one would include everyone who wishes to register in a workshop. But having even one participant whose neediness, mental or emotional state, behaviors or habits draw undue attention or energy, can make it challenging for the group to function or for the facilitator to provide a satisfactory workshop experience for all. For this reason, I will often ask the program organizer to help make decisions about whom to admit into

the program. For those the program is not appropriate for, we may encourage them and provide ideas for seeking support in other ways.

**Ground rules** are helpful for establishing the safe container. I typically introduce three main ground rules early in a workshop:

**I. Being Present.** “In order for us to be fully present—in body and in mind—throughout the workshop, a couple of ground rules: please **turn off or silence all devices** and please **break together as a group**. Due to the experiential nature of the program, it makes it difficult when individuals are out of the room and miss key instructions or steps, or are needed by a partner in order to do an exercise. So please speak up when you need a break, and I will work one in as soon as possible so that we can take a break together as a group. If you’re having an emergency and *must* leave the room, that’s fine; just let me know.”

**II. Confidentiality.** “There are three types of confidentiality that support our work together:

**Group.** “This is what we tend to expect when we think about confidentiality: Anything of a personal nature shared with the group does not leave the room.

**Pair/Team.** “Please do not assume that your partner or teammates in a small group exercise are OK with you sharing something they said or did with the whole group; they may have meant to share it only with you. Please ask them first.

**Breaks/Post-Program.** “Also please do not assume that another participant in the workshop is OK discussing their work in the program over a break

or after the program. They may wish to preserve that experience for themselves and not hear others' interpretations or questions. If you'd like to chat about their work, please ask their permission first."

**III. Caring.** "Caring" is a word that attempts to sum up how we want participants to treat one another during a program. The meaning of the word varies depending on the emphasis of the program.

**For a drama therapy program,** caring refers to how participants can support one another's emotional expression: "Our goal is to create an environment in which everyone is able to express his or her authentic emotions freely, including emotions such as sadness and anger—emotions participants tend to hide or suppress in the outside world. If someone is crying, for example, our goal is to support them. Beware unintentionally sending signals that you want them to stop." (At this point I often demonstrate what *not* to do, such as throwing tissues at the person or patting them rapidly on the back.) "Instead—as the Israeli workshop leader Gil Alon says—if someone is crying, *help them to cry more*. If we slow down and use our sensitivity in that moment, it will usually become evident what's needed, whether that means sitting next to them, providing some kind of supportive contact—a hand on their arm, an arm around their shoulders, a hug—or perhaps being a good witness as they continue whatever activity or scene evoked the emotion. Rapid patting, which many of us do habitually, sends a signal to stop crying ('it's OK, it's OK, you can stop now...'), whereas a firm hand on the back can help provide

steady support, conveying that there is all the time in the world to have a good cry. Rather than rush to provide tissues, as one therapist said, ‘that’s what sleeves are for!’ If it’s getting very messy, by all means offer a tissue or have a box nearby.”

**For a theater-oriented program,** the ground rule of “caring” can also refer to how participants give feedback to one another: “To encourage creativity and risk-taking, it is best to begin feedback with something positive, rather than starting with what’s not working, or by asking a challenging question (‘why did you do that that way?’). It’s also important that positive feedback be specific and authentic (rather than saying ‘good job!’ and then offering a critique). The ideal feedback is a sandwich, positive/constructive/positive.”

**Other ground rules** or ways of framing the overall approach or attitude of participants can also be useful, e.g., the idea of the program as a **learning laboratory**: “This is an opportunity to experiment, take risks, and be vulnerable. If you are trying to ‘look good’ or be perfect here, you and others will not learn as much.” There are other ground rules or practices that I may not speak about up front but tend to emerge during the program. For example, when teaching Insight Improvisation I have found it helpful to acknowledge individuals’ work in front of the group with “silent applause” (holding the hands in the air and twisting them a few times, which is American Sign Language for “applause”) rather than actual applause. This promotes acknowledgement—the group’s thanks to those individuals—while deemphasizing the performance aspect, and without

the recipient feeling they have been rated in some way (e.g., receiving faint instead of thunderous applause).

**Physical safety** is a vital part of the safe container, and is not to be assumed. In an opening check-in it is helpful to ask if anyone has any injuries or physical limitations they wish to share, and to remind the group to take care of themselves and others—e.g., in a group improvisation, to not assume it is OK to jump on someone else's back.

Authentic movement and working with eyes closed is a big part of Insight Improvisation, but having a group move with eyes closed can pose dangers. I always remind participants right before doing authentic movement, any of the entryway practices, or psolodrama, to open their eyes a little when moving through the space or making big gestures, so as not to step on or collide with other people or with objects. I also add **“you are responsible for your own safety and for the safety of others.”** As I witness the group, I will sometimes place my body between two movers (or psoloists) so they will collide with me rather than one another, encouraging participant witnesses to stay aware and do the same to help guard movers' safety.

**Timing** is another factor in maintaining a safe and sound container for the work. Have clear start, end, and meal times and stick to them; other breaks can be determined by group need. If you're running over, discuss it with the group and find out if they're willing; don't assume it's okay, and don't make a habit of running over as it erodes the group's trust.

An effective facilitator stays on time without conveying to the group the need to rush or that she is shortening certain exercises. The facilitator's own sense of urgency, or the adjustments she needs to make to the agenda, remain invisible to the group. The

facilitator is like a duck, looking completely placid gliding along the surface of the water, while underneath the feet are paddling rapidly. Ideally, participants feel they have all the time in the world to go deeply into each exercise—one hallmark of a well-facilitated program.

### Being an Effective Teacher

**Instructions** for exercises are best when succinct and clear. Certain instructions may need to be repeated so that participants understand them, because much may be new. Both the content of the instructions and the delivery needs to be compelling—even entertaining—to engage participants and excite them about what they are about to do. Tone is important: I try to introduce fun exercises with a sense of humor, and more serious exercises with gravitas.

**Demonstrations** also need to be clear and succinct, but ideally are also real and spontaneous. For example, when demoing the role stream exercise for a group, I really do the role stream—I close my eyes, open to my body, move authentically, notice what role or character is arising, and become it. I don't just recreate what I did in a previous demonstration. This helps convey the power of the work to the group, as it's evident I'm entering a process, a journey with depth and creativity. A canned demonstration doesn't generate the same kind of excitement, interest, and inspiration in the group. People are so used to seeing pre-planned demonstrations that I will often preface the demonstration by saying something like, "Rather than do a 'demo,' I'm actually going to do a short role stream so you can see what it's really like. Because I'm not planning this, I cannot predict what will happen. So I'm going to let go of the idea of trying to do a good demo, and just

allow what comes up for me authentically.” In some demos I pause now and then to comment on what’s happening, or to introduce a different stage of or variation on the exercise before I illustrate it. Sometimes, rather than demo an entire exercise, such as psolodrama, I talk through the instructions and enact brief role-plays along the way to illustrate the five psychodramatic roles and other concepts.

**The exercise itself.** During the exercise, the facilitator works to make sure everyone is engaged and involved. When directing a psychodrama, for example, one part of my mind is on how to engage the entire group, not just those active in the drama. I can do this by literally involving them, looking for ways to create small groups of auxiliary egos, or choruses of auxiliaries—e.g. having four people play “The Scary Boss” rather than one; or casting the entire group, e.g. as the “gossiping townspeople”. Or I may encourage everyone to gather around and sit closer during a particularly important or quiet scene. During pairs and small group work, I am looking carefully to make sure that the witnesses or coaches are fully engaged; if I see someone tuning out, getting drowsy, or looking elsewhere (e.g. the witness who is not watching their own partner during psolodrama), I may go and whisper in their ear or give an instruction to the whole group to remember to treat witnessing as a meditation and bring their focus back to their partner. I also encourage participants to stand if they are sleepy or just feel they’re sitting too much.

**Debriefs** are where much of the real learning occurs, and leading a debrief well is an art form in itself. (See the earlier section on Curriculum Design for thoughts on designing debriefs, and the relationship between sharing processes and debriefs.) The primary purpose of a debrief is to invite reflection on an experiential activity, so that

participants can recall and articulate their experiences doing it and begin to concretize those experiences into insights and learnings. But the debrief also has an important secondary function: it serves as a “warm-down,” so that any strong emotions encountered during the exercise can be acknowledged and appreciated. It is a transition between the imaginal and emotional world of the exercise and the more cognitive and social world of the workshop and thus to the consensual reality of the outside world.

In a group debrief, the facilitator tries as much as possible to hear from a variety of participants, especially those who are quiet or tend to raise their hands less. Quieter participants often have important messages that contribute to the learning of the whole group, including key insights and learnings, or feelings they are sitting on and not expressing which if expressed would actually allow the entire group to go to a deeper place. Including quieter voices also helps other shy or introverted participants feel more included, encouraging them to become more engaged and speak up as well.

There are a few things a facilitator can do to invite quieter voices into the conversation.

- **Explicitly ask.** “Let’s hear from those who have not had a chance to speak yet.”
- **Start with a pair conversation** before inviting sharing. This helps assure *everyone* has a chance to speak, even those too shy to share in front of the whole group. You can also time that pair conversation—give one or two minutes each—and ring a bell when it’s time to switch. This gives the less confident person, who may tend to go second, an equal chance to speak. After the pair debrief, say “We’d love to hear what’s being said in your

pair conversations. Perhaps someone who hasn't spoken yet to the whole group can tell us what they said to their partner...?" This is an easier step for an introverted or shy person because they've already said what they'd like to say aloud to their partner—in a sense, rehearsed it—so it's less scary when repeating it.

- **Call on them.** Later in the workshop, if you notice some people who are completely silent in group debriefs, try calling on them by name. "Jeff, how was your experience?" This is a little risky as it could cause the person to feel "on the spot." But usually the person has just not found the right time to jump in and appreciates the invitation. If they don't know what to say, you can follow your general query with a more specific question, such as "While you did the role stream, were you able to enter different roles?" Often offering a simple question, even a yes/no question, can invite them to then say more. However, if they really don't wish to speak, it's important to support them without hesitation: "You do not need to speak if you don't want to. Let's hear from someone else."

In exercises where the action is happening in pairs or small groups, and it's difficult (or inappropriate) for the facilitator to be listening in on each pair, it's helpful for the facilitator after each round of the exercise to get a quick read on how each group is doing. I often do this by asking how it went—e.g., asking "How'd your psolodrama go?"—and inviting the psoloist to give a thumbs up, shaky hand (for so-so), or a thumbs down. (You can tell if it went really well because participants will sometimes show two vigorous thumbs up.) I then ask those who had a shaky hand or thumbs down if they have

a question they'd like to ask, or anything they want to say. In that way, participants who are challenged in the exercise get special attention. If there's time, I'll invite those with thumbs up to share a little, if they would like, about what happened for them as well, so the group also hears examples of how the activity works when it is going well.

One of my favorite approaches to debriefing—which I use quite often, especially when the group has just been through an intensive process such as leading their own psychodramas in teams, or doing their own psolodramas—is inspired by Open Space technology (Owen, 2008). I say to the group: “For this group discussion, I'd like to take a few minutes now to create the space for *anything* you'd like to say: comments, questions, sharing your experience, anything. Let's take 10 minutes. It's open space, anyone can speak.” Periodically during the open space time, I may remind the group that anyone can say anything, especially if someone has asked a question that has led to a discussion on a specific topic—it may be necessary to open things back up. It's also helpful to add, midway through the open space, “I'd like especially to hear from people who have not had a chance to speak yet in front of the whole group.”

### **Maximum Engagement, Participation, and Connection**

Another thought on facilitation—and this has design implications, too—is that a primary goal of the facilitator is to encourage maximum engagement from each participant.

One implication of this is that each participant is participating as much as possible, in whatever ways are appropriate for them. For some participants that means challenging them to stretch further; for others it means creating a safe enough space to dip a toe in the water (and perhaps, eventually, more of themselves), to experiment and

explore. Maximum participant also means encouraging participants to try different roles in the workshop; e.g., when learning psychodrama, to gain experience as protagonist, as auxiliary ego and double in another's psychodrama, and as a director.

Another aspect of maximum engagement is maximum connection: each participant gets to work with as many other participants as possible, in meaningful ways. The design of the "Life Drama" program emphasizes exercises for pairs and small groups; part of my approach as a facilitator is to repeatedly ask participants to pick someone they do not know well, whom they have not yet worked with in the program. I will sometimes ask them to purposely pick someone they feel might be different from them. Changing partners help participants get to know more people over the course of the program, building invisible bonds of understanding, empathy, and trust within the group. Rather than repeatedly pairing with their best friend, or with a person they feel comfortable with, participants get to meet others who are different from them, providing new perspectives. Encountering others in a workshop context can teach powerful lessons in listening, empathy, caring, and patience; it can also open one to new and unexpected feedback and/or insights. Sometimes the biggest takeaway from a program is to encounter someone whose life experience—and/or ways of thinking or behaving—are truly different; to discover that someone who *appeared* different is actually quite similar, and struggling with parallel challenges in their life; or to make a new friend.

## Special Topics

### Working with Strong Emotions and Resistance

In a typical Insight Improvisation program, participants usually have signed up of their own free will. (This is not always the case, however. When teaching drama therapy to clinicians working for a particular organization, for example, some of those participants may have been told to be there.). Generally speaking, those who sign up for such programs tend to have a personal interest in or connection to meditation, theater, psychotherapy, and/or creative arts therapy, and—as one might expect—often have a relatively high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

However, the work we do in Insight Improvisation can be a stretch for some people. They may suddenly feel they are sharing more than they would like to and that they are feeling too vulnerable or exposed, which can cause them to react. Others may become triggered by the personal content that comes up in the work (theirs or others'), sparking deep sadness or grief, guilt or shame, anger or rage, directed toward some past relationship or incident in their life. Those emotions may feel out-of-control to those not used to experiencing them.

Much of what's already been discussed above—creating a safe container, being nonreactive, modeling lovingkindness, setting clear ground rules—is all helpful in reducing resistance and encouraging the healthy expression of emotion. Ideally, one approaches challenging moments with a combination of non-reactivity, empathy, and firmness (rigor, strength, and courage), but also with the attitude of letting go, not being

attached to a certain stance or approach. Here are a few other thoughts about what to do when faced with the unexpected as a facilitator:

**Strong Emotions.** If a participant is becoming overwhelmed with strong emotions in the midst of an exercise, approach them in a way that is supportive, not jarring, and that gives them a chance to pause the exercise and calm down. However, the boundary between what is a healthy and productive expression of emotion and what is “overwhelming” can be unclear from the outside. For example, when conducting the empty chair exercise and working with a single protagonist in front of the whole group, quite often that person expresses strong sadness or anger toward the empty chair figure. It is not unusual for them to kick the chair or throw it in rage; nor is it unusual for them to collapse in tears in front of the chair, putting their head in the “lap” of the invisible auxiliary ego. My role in either situation is to support them in the expression of these emotions, to facilitate, removing any obstacles that arise. However, if I see the protagonist being *overcome* with emotion, anger that seems out of control, or sadness that is collapsing in on itself—the person is uncontrollably sobbing or just silent, unable to speak—I will intervene. This can take different forms, depending on the situation:

**Empathic support.** For someone experiencing deep sadness or grief, knowing that the facilitator is right with them and supporting them fully is vital. Sometimes this just means sitting next to them as they sob. Supportive touch is also helpful. I always ask permission before touching someone—“may I touch you?”—and if they nod or say yes I may lay a hand flat on their back to provide support, or put an arm around them. As discussed earlier, providing tissues can also be supportive, but may send a mixed message (“does he want me to stop

crying?”), so it’s sometimes best to put them nearby so the protagonist can see them and easily reach them, but not put tissues right into their hands.

**Changing channels.** Sometimes a protagonist or psoloist—caught up in their anger or grief—may be silent, either acting out physically (e.g., kicking a chair) or bent over in grief. Adding the verbal channel, inviting them to add words, can help them express the thoughts in their head that are driving the strong emotions. (Articulating thoughts as language can also be a more intellectual activity, helping temper the strong emotions.) Often, this can also help take the scene from a stuck place to its next stage. Another channel to consider is the other role. In empty chair, psychodrama, or psolodrama, if the protagonist is stuck in a strong emotion, inviting her to reverse roles and become the other character usually helps her shift from the single strong emotion she is stuck in and see how the other character might feel. For example, if the protagonist is grieving for her dead mother, and is overcome with sadness, allowing her to become her mother, and say the things that she wishes her mother could say to her now, or had said before she died, can be supportive and affirming. It also lets the protagonist know that the spirit of her mother is alive within her.

**Deescalating.** If someone appears overwhelmed by strong emotion, I might check in with them, saying gently: “Mmmm. A lot of feeling. Shall we pause for a moment? How are you doing?” If I don’t get a clear response, I might ask a more concrete question, “Would you like to pause the exercise, or keep going?” If in my judgment I think the exercise should be stopped either for their

safety or the safety of the group, I intervene by saying, “OK...let’s pause here. Let’s sit together and talk.”

**Returning to the here and now.** Once they have paused and sat down, it’s good to take a moment to see what is needed. Sometimes offering some water can help the person transition from the imaginal realm, which was triggering the strong emotions, back into the present. If someone is truly dissociating or if they just seem out of it and not quite present, I might ask them to face me and make direct eye contact with me. I might smile and say slowly, “Hi. It’s Joel. Welcome back to the workshop. How are you doing?” Once they have calmed down a little, then inviting them to speak about what they just experienced can be helpful to them and to the group in processing what happened.

**Resistance** can take many forms. The seemingly common-sense question of “Why are we doing this?” before an exercise is usually a participant’s attempt to put on the brakes. Similarly, not understanding instructions despite explanations (e.g. “why do you want us to act out different roles?”) can indicate not a lack of understanding but an unwillingness to come on the journey. Usually a fear of looking foolish, or of being too vulnerable, prompts this inquiry. Someone who holds him or herself apart from the rest of the group, wishing only to observe, not to participate, is usually worried about what would happen if they participated. What might it reveal? Resistance also appears in a variety of subtler forms: the participant who is sleepy, zoning out, distracted; the participant who whispers to someone else and has side conversations; the participant who cracks jokes, or who seems sarcastic rather than speaking straightforwardly; the

participant who leaves the room whenever he pleases or comes back late from breaks, or checks his phone during the session.

The challenge with resistance is that it can push the facilitator's buttons, causing her to take the behavior personally and be reactive, even get angry, rather than see through the behavior and empathize with the likely underlying cause, which is fear: fear of being made fun of, fear of revealing something shameful, fear of confronting something in one's life that is uncomfortable to confront, fear of not being accepted by the group. The participant who is being humorous or whispering to others is likely doing that—usually unconsciously—as a way to avoid being fully present to work that is asking him to reveal aspects of his life that he does not wish to see clearly and does not wish others to see.

A few tips when dealing with resistance:

**Smile, breathe, and respond with kindness.** Most behaviors that come across as challenging are not meant to undermine the facilitator. The participant who leaves the room right before a pivotal exercise might have an emergency phone call; the participant who sits out an activity may be scared; the participant who is whispering to another may be too shy to ask you if it's OK to use the bathroom or may be asking if the other person understood what you just said. It is always best, if you find yourself triggered by what a participant is doing, not to take it personally, not to take it seriously, but instead to smile, breathe, and respond kindly. Treat the other person as you would wish to be treated, with respect, and with an assumption of innocence rather than guilt. Even better see if you can be *playful* in your response to resistance, rather than be a disciplinarian.

**Take it offline.** As mentioned earlier, if you would like to talk with a participant about a behavior that is negatively affecting you and/or the group, it is best to approach her during a break, or before or after the day's work. Ask her if you could talk with her privately for a minute, and take her aside. This is also a good thing to do if you have a difficult interaction with a participant in front of the group. I will usually approach that person offline to apologize to him and listen to him. Having a discussion offline helps because it avoids shaming the person in front of the group, and creates a more intimate context where the participant may feel he can more readily speak his truth.

**Agree with them and involve the group.** If a participant challenges something you are saying or questions the premise of an exercise, rather than battle with them, find a way to agree with them. For example, if in the debrief of psychodrama, a participant named Paul were to say, "Well, psychodrama isn't real life," I might respond by saying, "You're absolutely right. Psychodrama is not real life, and it's important to maintain the distinction between the two. In a psychodrama, everything we're playing out is a projection of the protagonist's psyche." Then I might open it up to the group: "Since psychodrama is not the same as real life, the role-plays we're doing are just role-plays, not real interactions, as Paul pointed out. What then is the point of doing it?" This invites the group to provide counter-arguments to Paul's stance. This group participation is much more effective for the group's learning process than if I were to debate Paul.

## Teaching Internationally

I've been fortunate as a trainer and coach—through my corporate as well as drama therapy work—to teach in dozens of countries around the world. I've also had the chance to spend time in developing countries volunteering as a teacher and therapist. These experiences have shown me some of what can help when teaching in another country.

**Unexpected Challenges, and Rewards.** Although I love traveling internationally, there are certainly downsides. Jetlag can be brutal when traveling long distances. Allow at least two nights of sleep in your destination before teaching, ideally more. Also, one's personal safety is not to be taken for granted. Pickpockets in Florence used a knife to cut into my backpack while I was wearing it. On my first visit to Delhi, a midnight taxi from the airport took me down foggy roads not to the hotel I'd made a reservation for, but instead to a strange, rundown hotel where, given the late hour and everyone claiming to not know the location of my hotel, I had to pay for a room. Different countries have different standards. In some areas, the lack of availability of toilet paper in bathrooms will be new to many Americans. It was a personal breakthrough to learn how to use a squat toilet in India and clean myself with the water provided. And I had to fall seriously ill in Thailand before I learned to stick to cooked foods. Then there is the potential of unexpectedly offending someone by using your left hand improperly, pointing with your foot, refusing a gift or an invitation, or touching someone's head. Any of these can be problematic in different countries.

Despite those potential difficulties, it's an incredible feeling to be among people of a completely different culture and to be learning about them and getting closer to them

through teaching. As Paulo Freire wrote (1970), good teaching is dialogic: the teacher learns as much as the student. Teaching Insight Improvisation internationally not only provides a window into another culture, it also provides a profound experience of connection with what makes us human across all cultures.

**Working with Cultural Differences.** Although the internet is an excellent source for general advice about cultural dos and don'ts, there are things the internet won't tell you that can come up in workshop situations. In Thailand—and this is true in different forms throughout much of Asia—it is a loss of face to express anger directly and openly. Instead, one of the highest cultural values in Thailand is to maintain calm, and to smile. In the empty chair exercise, no matter which country I am in, it is possible for the protagonist to see in the chair a challenging figure from their past, such as a sadistic teacher or abusive uncle. But it is only in Thailand that, when I ask the protagonist how they feel in the presence of this person, the response is often, “I'm bored.” This puzzled me the first couple of times it happened, until I began to realize that “I'm bored” was the polite way of saying, “I'm so filled with rage right now that I could kill you.” Within a minute or two, especially when invited to take physical action, the protagonist would often be kicking the empty chair, throwing it across the room, while screaming the most violent insults.

**Guiding Meditations.** Another cultural difference useful to be aware of concerns meditation. One facilitator I know who leads programs in the US that involve mindfulness has taken to calling meditation “inner listening” because some Christian groups have negative associations with meditation and Buddhism. In Thailand I have sometimes encountered the opposite problem. Thailand is a proudly Buddhist country,

where it is not unusual to encounter experienced meditators, some of whom are devotees of a particular monk or meditation teacher. Early on, as I began to introduce meditation in workshops in Thailand, I would sometimes get feedback afterward that one or two participants were unhappy and had the idea that I was trying to supplant their meditation master. For others, it may have felt a little strange for a westerner to be teaching Buddhist meditation to Buddhists. I've learned that when teaching meditation, it is important to take a humble, low-key approach. So I often preface the first meditation in a workshop by saying something like: "Before we meditate together, I'd like to say that it's a little funny for an American to be offering a meditation in a Buddhist country like Thailand. There may be some of you who are experienced meditators, who teach meditation, or who are the student of a particular meditation teacher or method. So please understand that I am not trying to become your meditation teacher. The reason we are introducing meditation in this program is to help illustrate and practice the different kinds of awareness we will then be applying in our drama therapy work. So please, for those who are experienced, do what works for you. Meditate in the way you know best, and feel free to ignore any of the instructions that I give and use the approach that you are familiar with and most comfortable with."

**Working with Translation.** Language can present multiple challenges. So much of drama therapy depends on timing, and one only fully realizes that when trying to work through a translator. Directing psychodrama through a translator is like trying to do surgery with thick winter gloves on. Clarity becomes a big issue, not only *my* ability to give clear instructions—clear enough for the translator to understand and convey—but also my ability to understand my translator, who is half the time whispering in my ear,

rapidly, with a strong accent. Being succinct is an enormous challenge; can I break what I'm saying down into bite-sized pieces so my translator can communicate each part? The temptation is to try to say more and then let them do their best to sum it up, which does not work well.

The good news is that working through translation can actually be helpful. Saying a little and then pausing for translation provides a welcome gap that allows me to craft my next succinct sentence. Sometimes the instructions come out *more* clearly than in a workshop for English speakers.

I have learned over the years that one of the secrets to working through a translator is not only the quality and experience of that person, but also the quality of communication I have with them before we work together. I've developed a set of guidelines (see "Appendix B: Sample Logistics for Group Programs") that the organizer can send to the translator in advance, covering issues such as translating literally what I say (rather than interpreting it or adding to it), matching my volume and energy, and more. I also have learned to ask the translator to arrive a half hour early on the first day so I can chat with them, build a friendly relationship, review the translation guidelines with them in person, and answer any questions they have.

One more thought about language: typically in the US I do not use flipcharts for Insight Improv programs, preserving the informal, interpersonal quality of a theater workshop or therapeutic process; however, I find that in non-English-speaking countries having some of the concepts spelled out on charts helps a great deal with understanding and retention.

## Being a Guest Teacher

Both in the US and internationally I have had the opportunity to be a guest teacher, in university programs, drama therapy programs, peer groups, conferences, and in other contexts. Teaching in someone else's class or context is like coming into a different culture with its own language and norms. One can easily and quite accidentally violate those norms and rub people the wrong way.

Insight Improvisation is not like other forms of drama therapy; its pace is slower, its focus more contemplative and inward-directed. Teaching Insight Improv in someone else's program is a bit like being asked by an Italian restaurant to come in and offer some Chinese food during the meal. Some may love it, others may think it's weird, and others may find that it just doesn't go with their calzone. I have also found that everyone has different standards and ground rules. The safe container we depend on in Insight Improvisation may or may not be established. A few commonsense principles help:

**Name it and claim it.** Talk with the host beforehand about the unusual nature of Insight Improv and discuss whether it will be a fit. If you decide to teach the program, be clear with the group from the start that this work is a little unusual, and we may go places they are not used to going. If you're going to teach psolodrama or the entryway practices, it's helpful to poll the group (ideally, in advance) to find out how many have experienced meditation, authentic movement, or psychodrama before.

**Make no assumptions.** Coming into a new class or group, inquire about and don't be afraid to discuss the ground rules. Do what's needed to create the safe container for what you will be teaching.

**Be aware of time.** Teaching Insight Improv well takes time, usually more time than you would expect. Every exercise takes longer than you think it will; the nature of this work is meditative, contemplative, intimate, personal, and cannot be rushed. It's different from typical improv or acting exercises where a group can just jump in. Insight Improv has a little bit of a ritualistic feeling. For example, when teaching psolodrama, it's vital that the group get a solid grounding in authentic movement, and then have sufficient time to return to authentic movement as they encounter each new stage of the entryway progression (shared vipassana, role stream, etc.).

**When in doubt, don't do it.** Although I've had some lovely experiences teaching in others' classes and in other contexts, in general I've learned to turn down guest teaching slots and focus on organizing my own workshops. Ultimately I've found that the unique nature of this work is expressed best in dedicated programs.

## Final Thoughts

A good workshop leader is continuously learning and improving. After every program, make sure to seek feedback from the group—ideally, a written letter or evaluation form *before* participants depart—to learn what worked well and what could have been better. This will help you improve your program design as well as facilitation skills.

I would love for others to have the chance to teach Insight Improvisation to groups, to have the opportunity to create a sacred space in which people can relax, let go, and discover and express their personal truths. Every time I do this work I feel privileged, and especially grateful to the many teachers, therapists, theater artists, and dharma guides

who helped me on my path and helped give me the confidence to share what I know with others. Allow me to end this chapter with a deep bow of gratitude to all my teachers, as well as to all my students, whom I learn from continuously.

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## Additional Resources

*Opportunities for training in the five areas of expertise mentioned earlier in this chapter:*

### Insight Improvisation

I periodically teach Insight Improvisation programs in the US and other countries, usually several times per year, and will soon add clinician and teacher training. To learn more, please contact me through my website, [www.insightimprov.org](http://www.insightimprov.org).

## Meditation

Building on the list of books and other resources mentioned at the end of the chapter on meditation earlier in this book, I would strongly suggest a meditation retreat for those who are interested in deepening their practice and gaining a better understanding of how meditation develops and conditions the mind toward greater peace, lovingkindness, and nonreactivity. An eight-day retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA is a good way to start (or try Spirit Rock on the west coast, or any of the Insight Meditation centers worldwide). Teachers I'd recommend include Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Larry Rosenberg, Mark Nunberg, Steve Armstrong, Sharda Rogell, Narayan Liebenson, and Rodney Smith. It is also worth checking out centers teaching Tibetan and Zen Buddhist approaches to meditation, to further enrich one's learning.

Cultivating a daily practice of meditation is supportive to all aspects of one's life. I would also suggest finding opportunities—even as a volunteer—to teach meditation regularly. (In my early days developing Insight Improvisation, I taught meditation weekly to inmates in a medium-security prison in Boston.) The combination of daily meditation, reading about meditation, teaching meditation often, and sitting retreats periodically, will increase your ability to teach meditation skillfully and with credibility in an Insight Improvisation context.

## Theater

Particular teachers or schools of training I recommend:

**Voice.** Kristin Linklater, or a Linklater-certified teacher, as well as the Roy Hart Theater and teachers trained in their approach.

**Movement.** My favorite movement teacher was Richard Toma, who was trained in physical improvisation, street theater, and Commedia

dell'arte. I have also benefitted from the training exercises of Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre. Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater is wonderfully physical. And I recommend learning yoga (e.g., Iyengar technique) for strengthening and overall physical presence, as well as any type of dance training.

**Improvisation.** Authentic movement is a foundational form of improvisation that underlies many Insight Improvisation exercises (see the earlier chapter devoted to it) and is worth training in and practicing in depth. Also described earlier in this book, the types of improvisation taught by Scott Kelman and Ruth Zaporah are unique and worth pursuing. I have learned a great deal from the work of Keith Johnstone, Augusto Boal (Theatre of the Oppressed), and Jonathan Fox (Playback Theatre). In addition, *any* improvisation experience can be helpful, including theater games in the Viola Spolin tradition, improv comedy, etc.

**Scene Study and Shakespeare.** There are countless approaches to scene work—from Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov to Mamet's work with The Atlantic Theater Co and Anne Bogart's Viewpoints. In addition to my initial training at the Trinity Rep Conservatory in Providence, I would also recommend Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, MA for their month-long intensive training focusing on voice and Shakespeare.

Finally, for real experience, there is nothing like doing actual theater. I'd suggest auditioning for and acting in a play, or joining (or forming) an improv group.

### **Drama therapy and Psychodrama**

One can find individual workshops or classes in drama therapy and psychodrama in many cities, a great way to dip one's toe in the water or to refresh existing skills. At the other end of the spectrum, there are graduate training programs in drama therapy, including those at NYU,

CIIS, Concordia, and Lesley; attending one of those programs can fulfill many of the prerequisites for earning the RDT (Registered Drama Therapist) certification. (For a complete list of schools, see <http://www.nadta.org/education-and-credentialing/resources-for-students-and-bcts/accredited-schools.html>.) There is also the Alternative Training Program, a way to become certified without going through an academic graduate program (see <http://www.nadta.org/education-and-credentialing/resources-for-students-and-bcts/alternative-training.html>). Psychodrama has its own approach to certification (see <http://www.psychodramacertification.org>); however, in my experience, a good training program in drama therapy should provide a solid grounding in psychodrama (if not, one should seek additional training opportunities with experienced psychodramatists). For those new to this field, I also highly recommend attending the NADTA's yearly conference, an opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of approaches.

In addition to training, there is practice. I'd suggest joining a peer practice group, or forming one, for those interested in trying out drama therapy techniques or practicing psychodrama directing. The training programs listed above require and include opportunities for practical experience, including internships with mental health clinics, hospitals, and the like. If you are not yet certified but would like to practice with individuals, it is also possible to get together with friends to practice drama therapy techniques (with the clear mutual understanding up front that it is a practice session, and that you are not trying to be their therapist). And once you have done all of the above, it is helpful to practice leading drama therapy exercises with groups—not only in clinical settings but in workshops for the general public.

## Facilitation

Although there are books on facilitation, teaching, and training—and training programs in these domains as well—I would suggest that practical experience is the best way to improve as a facilitator. When I was learning to deliver programs in leadership presence and communication for the corporate world, I practiced by offering free workshops to the local Department of Employment and Training. Look for opportunities to teach classes and workshops, in a wide range of topics, to a wide range of audiences. Teach theater to kids. Teach meditation. Offer a workshop in an Assisted Living Community. Volunteer with the formerly incarcerated or in prison. Share what you know with the world, and be open to learning, seeking feedback from participants so you can continuously improve.