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Using Long-Form Improvisational Theatre Training and Techniques to
Build Stronger Group Connection and Empower Egalitarian Leadership

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Abstract

Through my work in both ensemble theatre (play making and producing) and improvisation, I have experienced moments where the group syncs in such a way that each person seems to connect to a greater whole. In improvisation, the term Group Mind is used to describe this moment. In these moments, there is a strong communion between the players and leadership shifts between them in such a way that the group seems to become completely egalitarian: a leaderless ensemble. This research project observes and analyzes techniques of long-form improvisation to promote shared leadership so the group may work together faster, more efficiently, and lead to strong group creativity.

In long-form improvisation, leaderless groups are quite common. Decisions in the group about direction, rehearsal times, production dates and the like are decided by consensus, without a designated leader; however, the process of improvising provides a platform for which egalitarianism can flourish. In the creation of long-form improvisation scenes the group works to build scenes by shifting leadership between the players. There is no designated leader in the process of building a long-form improv scene.

This research project sets up a series of workshops in long-form improvisation with two separate working groups. Through the practice and experimentation of long-form improvisation techniques, this project shows that it is possible to create a platform with which ensembles may be able to build stronger group connections and form a leaderless ensemble. Through connections made in long-form improvisation, the group began to work as leaderless ensemble. Hopefully, the findings of this project may be used by other groups to achieve strong group connection and create a shared leadership (egalitarian) ensemble.

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1. Introduction

In the first 25 pages in his book *Encountering Ensemble*, John Britton tries to define the word “ensemble” (2013). His attempts document a collective awareness that occurs between members of a theatre group that elevate the performance and/or group creation into a synergy that is recognizable by the artists and audience alike. Britton finds a cohesive definition of “ensemble” elusive. He expertly discusses various ensembles and attempts to gain insight into those groups that achieve “it” (4), a strong ensemble connection that is evident to performer and audience; however, it is not the intention of Britton’s work to serve as a process guide for ensembles to create a stronger group bond. In my work as a theatre maker, I feel it is essential to build “it” within the group to create the most impactful experience for the artist and audience, but, how might this bond be established on a consistent basis? Perhaps groups with shared leadership achieve synergy more easily. Perhaps using techniques specifically found in long-form improvisation training [a system of building improvisation through agreement statements by each player that lead to a series of scenes that weave together, connect, and reveals a performance piece that resembles a one-act play] assist in creating a strong group bond. Groups that listen most intently and have great empathy among the players may be groups that connect more easily. It is my goal to discover if the process of long-form improvisational practice can be a useful tool in developing a group that is able to share leadership and create the ensemble “it” on a consistent basis.

I have been a theatre maker for over 40 years. I am currently the Artistic Director for Maryland Ensemble Theatre (a small professional theatre in Frederick, MD) and the Program

Manager for Theatre at Frederick Community College; both positions I've held for over 20 years. In my career, I have directed over 50 production, performed in over 100 shows, and have also designed lighting, sets, and sound. Through my personal experience in education and professional theatre, I have seen a continuing hybridization of various methods and forms to reach certain goals in theatre. In the initial phase of creating a training program for young actors through Maryland Ensemble Theatre (1995), we set teenagers on a track of training for one hour in improvisation followed by 1.5 hours of study in Stanislavsky-based actor training. It was designed so that students would warm-up, learn to focus, to listen, to be creative, and to be allowed the space to take risks without judgement. It appeared that the improv course ultimately helped bond the group so that they could be open and vulnerable for Stanislavski based scene and to take bigger risks in character work. Since 1995, I've seen many improvisational warm-up games and exercises enter the rehearsal room for all kinds of theatre, from published plays to musicals, and I've used improvisation to build devised theatre pieces. Long-form improvisation, a subset of the Chicago improvisational comedy milieu, relies on deep listening and positive support in the creation of a scene. Could the training and exercises specific to long-form improvisation prove to be a way to build a stronger ensemble? Is it possible to break down the hierarchy of director led theatre to create an egalitarian troupe through long-form improvisational training?

This research project examines the methods and practices of long-form improvisation and its impact on the group connections among the ensemble of players. Through practical research, this project explores the dynamics of leadership roles, the shifting hierarchy in performance ensembles, the attitudes and feelings of the players toward group cohesion, active listening among the players, and the possibility of achieving Group Mind consistently while losing the hierarchy of the "group leader;" thus becoming a functional egalitarian

group. In this workshop, I am working toward the creation of a shared leadership group in the process of creating long-form improvisation, as opposed to the task oriented organization of the group (dates, times, schedule, etc.). As an ensemble theatre practitioner and college professor, the uncovering of a process that may build stronger group connections and shared leadership will be very beneficial.

Methodology

I am a theatre maker, director, actor, improviser, educator and an ensemble member of a small professional ensemble theatre company. Sharing knowledge, information, and creating a space of mutual respect and deep listening has been a goal of our theatre ensemble; with that, we've seen the company move away from hierarchical leadership, to a more egalitarian (shared leadership) model. As the goal of this project is to build an egalitarian group through long-form improvisation, it seemed most logical that I participate as an improviser in the workshop so that I get an inside view of the project and attempt to elicit the personal experience of each member of the group. Being a team member allows me to take leadership at the beginning (as the program curator) and witness shared leadership, should it arise in the group. Practice as Research (PaR) is used in artistic inquiry and my use of PaR will, hopefully, allow insights into the work that are not possible by only being an outside observer (Nelson 2013). I felt the best method to serve the practitioner/researcher, the participants, and the field in this case was a line of naturalistic inquiry through a heuristic research approach using group workshops as a platform for my work. Colin Robson, in his book *Real World Research* (1993), spells out ideals useful for researchers that are also practitioners in the same field as the research, of which I am one.

Heuristic research is a system whereby the researcher is very close to the subject matter. The researcher can be very involved in the discovery of data reflecting on his or her own experience in the work and allow that to help formulate and alter theories that may lead to deeper inquiry and be presented in a creative way. Carl Moustakas (1994) writes, "The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries" (17). He continues, "The process of discovery leads investigators to new images and meanings regarding human phenomena, but also to realizations relevant to their own experiences and lives."

Naturalistic inquiry, as taken from Lincoln and Guba's book of the same name (1981), seems a logical fit for my type of work. Pillars of naturalistic inquiry include conducting the research in a natural setting, in this case, a theatre, studio, rehearsal space, or wherever the group being studied works. Naturalistic inquiry uses people (their ideals and attitudes) as the basis of the data; using the "human as instruments" (192). Seeing as how the "humans are the instruments" in this work, it focuses on qualitative methods. I've used theatre studios, video tape of each session, and as data metrics, I've used personal reflection and surveys to capture the attitude of the participants. Naturalistic inquiry suggests utilizing inductive data analysis.

"Purposive sampling" is another tenet of Lincoln and Guba's work. My work leads me to seek out performers interested in improvisation who have a goal of working without a central leader; creating case studies of these groups are, in effect, purposive sampling. Lincoln and Guba write (199), "All sampling is done with some purpose in mind. Within the

conventional paradigm that purpose almost always is to define a sample that is in some sense representative of a population to which it is desired to generalize.”

Through working in improvisation and in devising theatre, I have, at times, felt strong connections among the performers, therefore, it is my hope to discover a method for creating these moments on a consistent basis. My hypothesis is that work based on long-form improvisation can help build that ensemble connection. Naturalistic Inquiry will allow me the latitude to alter my methods if I see another possible hypothesis emerge. Robson has an excellent summary of Lincoln and Guba's major points of naturalistic inquiry in the form of a table (61). Both Grounded Theory, “preference for theory to emerge from the data,” and Emergent Design, “research design emerges from the interaction with the study” formed the basis for the construction of my workshop template. The group used daily discussions in the workshop in an attempt to understand the practice and to be able to interpret and assess which methods seemed to work best for the group (Negotiated Outcome).

In addition to qualitative analysis, I tracked the language of each participant to quantify leadership statements, used daily surveys to track attitudes of the performers, and used the Active Empathetic Listening Scale (AELS), developed by Drollinger et al (2006) and refined by Bodie (2011), to attempt to assess the group’s listening skills. I also used the lexicon of the AELS to facilitate group conversations about how well the ensemble used listening skills in improvisation.

As I am a theatre maker in ensemble theatre with a desire to study group dynamics, the Practice as Research method that allows a detailed focus on interactions among performers is a primary life focus and to devise ways in which group participants can build stronger bonds is key to my life goal. With this project, using Naturalistic Inquiry, purposive sampling, and inductive data analysis, I will test the theory that long-form improvisation

practice leads to a stronger group bond and shared leadership while also allowing theories and revelations to emerge from the workshop process. Using both qualitative and quantitative data points, the project will serve to prove that training and systems from long-form improvisation create a strong group connection.

Project Description

In forming a workshop project, I thought it best set up a two-group experimental design. The design had two separate groups taking the workshop on a similar track, pedagogy, and schedule. The analysis of two groups receiving the same training and workshop time would gain insight into whether the process was only possible with one group, or the data might show that the training, skills, and observations are achievable with multiple groups and, quite possibly, general enough that it may be used by other performance groups.

To study the effects of long-form improvisation techniques on group dynamics, I created a series of one-day-a-week workshops over the course of two months with two separate groups (4-7 attendees). Workshops typically ran between 1 hour and 15 minutes to 2 hours for 14 total workshops that were recorded via video camera in their entirety (except for the initial orientation meetings). I promoted the workshop in my professional ensemble theatre, on my personal Facebook page, and in three local colleges; since this was my main area of promotion, the groups reflected my own experience. The Wednesday workshop group completed 8 meetings and the Sunday group met 6 times. Each workshop group followed a similar pedagogical template with minor deviation.

In the Sunday working group, the participants consisted of three professional theatre ensemble members, a professional nurse, who is a part-time scenic designer, one

professional actor, and one professional theatre educator. Personally, I am connected closely with the three members of our professional ensemble (Maryland Ensemble Theatre, MET): the nurse I had trained in a stagecraft class about a decade ago, and we have since worked together; the professional actor I had never met so I interviewed him for this program, and the educator I had met before, but, we have never worked on a project together. After the first weekend, one MET ensemble member had to drop out of the workshop due to the time commitment, and, the professional actor kept missing workshops and eventually dropped out. This left a core of five in the Sunday group: me, Donna the nurse, MET members Julie and IO [sic], and Emilie the educator.

There were various degrees of performance and/or experience in improvisation in the Sunday group. Julie is an experienced performer, teacher, director, and is an Associate Artistic Director at Maryland Ensemble Theatre; however, she has had very little experience in improvisation. Donna is not a performer; however, her daughter is an actress and dancer so she has a great deal of experience in viewing different styles of performance. It follows that Donna has had no performance experience with improvisation. Emilie is a theatre educator for children, so she is very knowledgeable about theatre games for children (many developed by Viola Spolin) and has had training and experience in improvisation. IO is an actor, stand-up comedian, writer, and has both experience and training in improvisation and the most experience at long-form improvisation of anyone in the group. Group workshops were held at Maryland Ensemble Theatre in the Second Stage venue (a 62-seat thrust space mainly used for children's theatre).

Sunday Group Roster

Julie: Actor, Director, Educator, little improv experience

Donna: Nurse, non-performer, no improv experience

Emilie: Educator, good deal of improvisation experience

IO: Hair & Make-up specialist, actor, good deal of improvisation experience

Matt: Actor, improviser, attended only one workshop

Joe: Actor, little improv experience, only attended one workshop

The Wednesday workshop group was held at Frederick Community College (FCC) in the Studio Theatre space, an 80-seat black box space. The attendees of the Wednesday workshop also had some degree of performance and/or improv experience. Jeanine is a MET ensemble member who has much experience in performing, but very little experience in improvisation. Madi, a former student of mine, and a recent college graduate had little experience with improvisation or onstage performance. Richard is a former student who enjoyed improvisation at college, but has not performed in over three years. Gabe is a current student of mine and is in the FCC improv troupe. He has experience in both short and long form improvisation. Sheila is a professional actress who has had some experience with short-form improvisation, but no experience with long-form. Two other attendees need mentioning: Noelle is a student of mine who only attended the first session, and Todd is a professional actor with no improv experience who tried to attend each workshop, but only attended one in the latter days of the Wednesday workshop.

Wednesday Group Roster

Sheila: Actor, little improv experience

Madi: Student, little improv experience

Jeanine: Actor, singer, little improvisation experience

Richard: Former theatre student, some improv experience

Gabe: Student, some performance experience, some improvisation

Noelle: Student, some improv, only attended once

Todd: Actor, no improvisation experience, only attended once.

As I have been working in ensemble theatre for over 30 years, it has always been an interest to best understand how to make a theatre ensemble tighter, closer, and more connected. How can we, as theatre makers, create that same experience consistently? I felt it essential that I place myself within each group for two main reasons: 1) so that each group could get a consistent message about, and training in improvisation and 2) if I am in the moment, can I recognize if and when the group connects?

The initial meeting for each group began with an overview of the project, a discussion about the goals of the attendees, and a session where the group created a list of “group agreements” (MacDonald 2013) that will serve as a platform from which to hold all future meetings. In Joan Schirle’s paper *Collaboration: Potholes in the Road to Devising* (2005), she points out that when working collaboratively, ensembles should create a basic set of guidelines from which to work, one might even call them “rules for civility” (91). I found that the collaborative process of creating a list of Group Agreements and hearing from each member of the group set the tone for each meeting: that participants’ voices and opinions

were heard and honored. Our set of Group Agreements were written on easel tablet paper and affixed to a wall in each of the two workshop rooms for the duration of the workshop period (two months).

The Sunday group listed “agreements” as:

1. Start on Time
2. Start with warm up
3. End on time
4. Work toward trust
5. Be empathetic
6. Communication is everything
7. Speak up, don't be shy
8. Don't play with show props that are in the room
9. There are no dumb questions
10. Be respectful
11. Less criticism- more growth
12. Be able to let go of an idea
13. Keep workshop to 2 hours or less
14. Keep the camera on!

The Wednesday group had similar agreements:

1. Start on time
2. Play and make it fun
3. Work with intention and purpose
4. Work towards trust, respect, and empathy
5. Warm up

6. Communicate
7. When you are here, you are here
8. Be kind
9. Turn camera on
10. Each person leads a warm up

To reach these group agreements, I posed a series of questions to the group that helped to extrapolate each list. I proposed questions such as “how would we like to begin each session,” “what goals do you have for the group,” and “what do you expect from the other participants?” The agreements were created solely by the workshop attendees, with the exception of my contribution to the list of “turn camera on.” At the start of each workshop, it was clear that I was the intended leader, I arranged the meeting times, gathered the groups, and led the initial workshops. Over time, the role of “leader” would shift.

Both the Sunday and Wednesday groups agreed that each workshop should begin with a warm-up game, and it was decided that each participant would come to each workshop prepared to lead a group warm-up game. This, immediately, set up a precedent that each meeting would empower each participant with the opportunity to take a leadership role by starting a warm-up game and/or teaching a new game. Group agreement on the agenda of each meeting, and the inclusion of ideas from each member, began to loosen the strict hierarchical leadership model with sights set on a more egalitarian one.

I then began to instruct each workshop in the elementary rules and techniques of scene building for long-form improvisation. Both groups were instructed in the elementary improvisation games that teach how to build scenes upon agreement. Both groups were then introduced to a method of editing a scene that “taps out” one character and is replaced

by a new character, while keeping one person in the scene as the same character from the previous scene. This is an essential technique used in the long-form game *Le Ronde* and introduces the players to the concept that long-form improv should incorporate a continuing story, multiple stories, or a thematic through-line. Soon after this technique was mastered by each group, the researcher introduced the “wipe” edit (running in front of a scene to end it) as a means to move the storyline to a completely different scene. This initial phase of the workshop illustrates how I had a clear leadership role from the beginning.

Each workshop began to take on a similar template: warm-up game section (one game per participant), a game specifically intended to build a long-form scene theme or data, a long-form improv scene session (typically between 20 and 40 minutes) then a brief discussion of the work. At this point, time dependent, the group would either finish by taking the workshop survey or take a short break and return for another session of improvisation then finish with the workshop survey. One deviation between the groups occurred when the Sunday group agreed that sharing personal stories around a theme or topic would both generate material from which to improvise, and would strengthen the relationships in the group on a personal level.

As it was obvious from the creation of the workshop series, I was the main leader in the group. Through the training, then practice of improvisation, the group began to diversify leadership to the point where I was no longer the main leader of the group. To quantify leadership statements made by each person in the group, a system of counting leadership statements was created and tracked.

2. Leadership

Shared (Egalitarian) Leadership

Leadership that is distributed among a team to form a “shared leadership” (368)

model has been discussed by Yukl (1998) and Pearce et al. (2001) studied voluntary groups that become empowered. Pearce and Sims (2002) found that “shared leadership was found to be an important predictor of team effectiveness” (183). I have found times in my work as educator and professional performer/director where groups have solidified as a whole and shared leadership effectively. The project explores the process of building a shared leadership in the creation of art, not necessarily in the management of a group. Might long-form improvisation be used as a method to consistently build egalitarian leadership for the process of creating theatre?

Sandra Pintor (2014) at the University of California, Irvine, created an outline for the prospect of creating shared leadership teams in business. She recommends that as one is creating a shared leadership group, one must: “carefully select team members” that have the needed knowledge base, train the team thoroughly in leadership skill, and “provide supportive coaching” (2-3). In addition, Pintor recommends a “process of facilitating the shared leadership activity” that suggests that groups plan around a common view of the leadership style, create a shared purpose for the group, provide support (emotional and psychological) for the team, learn to work together, build trust, and understand the demands of a particular task.

As any group gains an understanding of the goal and the belief in the method of achieving that goal; the group begins to form tighter bonds as is detailed in studies in collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Zaccaro et al., 1995). Studies show that the higher

collective efficacy in a group, the stronger the motivation and persistence to perform a task, even under difficult circumstances (Earley, 1994; Hodges & Carron 1992).

This workshop was built on the foundation that the participants would, eventually, become a “shared leadership” egalitarian ensemble. From the start, activities were built around group activities, including group feedback, listening to all parties, and as the workshop progressed, both groups began to believe that they could enter in to the workshop room without instruction from a single leader and begin to create improvisations. Thus, over the term of the workshop, my role as leader would be abdicated to the will of the group.

Leaderless Performance Ensembles

I conducted research into leaderless performance ensembles in hopes of finding details that might be helpful with this project. Improv troupes, especially those born out of Chicago improvisational training institutions, are often examples of leaderless performance troupes. Troupes that are the product of Second City, Improv Olympic, Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, or Annoyance Theatre’s improvisational training programs often work for years without a director. When we explore theatre ensembles that work without a director, or without the “director/actor hierarchy,” do we find that working without a director creates a stronger group bond? Or, does a strong group dynamic help to create a platform in which groups may function as a leaderless group?

In addition to the Chicago Improvisation community, one can find director-less group decision making in sketch comedy troupes, including the Monty Python comedy troupe. In an interview in the Harvard Business Review from March, 2014, John Cleese reflects on the inner workings of the group:

Python always was democracy run riot. There was no senior person, no pecking order, no hierarchy. It was always a question of reading things out, and if they made people laugh, they were put in the show. If people didn't laugh, they almost certainly weren't. That was the litmus test. Had we been trying to portray a philosophy or something like that, there would have been much more argument.

<https://hbr.org/2014/03/john-cleese/ar/1>

In this case, the decision-making process was dependent on whether a scene would make a member of the troupe laugh. Cleese refers to the group having a democratic process that was, ultimately, decided by the collective's sense of humor. This insight shows that Monty Python worked as an egalitarian ensemble, however, the interview gives little detail to how another group might emulate this methodology.

Devising in Process explores the process of eight different productions. In their introduction, Mermikides and Smart (2010) hypothesize that the very act of devising is "a group activity and one that often contests the model of the singular creative artist," (1) and raises the questions, "If earlier models of devising process represented collaborations as an alternative to the hierarchy of the director's theatre, is contemporary devising still defined by its collaborative nature and, if so, what kinds of collaborations are employed?" This collection of writing, following the process of such ensembles as People Show, Complicité, Theatre O, and Shunt, gives a detailed insight into the group process of theatre makers, but does not show evidence of long-form improvisation methods as a way to build stronger bonds within the groups.

In *Devising in Process*, Synne K. Behrndt writes a piece about the 2007 tour of *The Birthday Party* devised by the UK ensemble The People Show, which formed in 1966. Behrndt reviews the company with a brief overview, then explores the collaborative decision-making process, “The company’s non-autocratic approach to process and performance is currently reflected in their organizational structure where, instead of an artistic director, a steering group consults with a wide network of People Show associate artists on future projects and planning “(34). *Devising in Process* does provide valuable information for forming ensembles, introduces various methods of creative play making, gives examples of non-hierarchical ensembles, and explores the collective decision making process; however, does not provide a process for groups to follow who may wish to build a strong egalitarian ensemble.

In their conclusion to Chapter 2 of *Devising Performance*, Heddon and Milling (2006) point out that much of the ensemble work of the 1960s and 1970s led to strong autocrats in charge of productions and the direction of the companies (perhaps as a result of the “director as leader” paradigm in commercial theatre), although a quote from Colin Chambers expresses the opinion that collective collaboration gave all actors more creative power, “...it was radical, egalitarian cooperation that allowed the individual actor to be more expressive and creative rather than the authoritarian relationships of the conventional theatre” (61). This cites an excellent example as to why an egalitarian model might be beneficial, but, offers no methods to create such a model.

Under the subtitle “The Mode of Production” (101), Heddon and Milling explore the works of Siren Theatre Company, People Show, The Theatre Group, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, and give a case study on the feminist UK ensemble of the 1970’s Red Ladder (101-109). This section looks at the collective form, the use of improvisation, the decision-making

process, and spotlights Red Ladder's *Strike While the Iron is Hot, or A Woman's Work is Never Done*. Heddon and Milling also point to the structural issues in the 1960's with The San Francisco Mime Troupe. The troupe was attempting a non-hierarchical structure, but eventually opted to give way to a gerontocracy where the older members would make decisions; however, the older troupe members did not want the responsibility (107). The section does highlight other methods that the collective used to overcome egalitarian decision-making obstacles. The troupe attempted a "loosely ordered collective" which resulted in a member resignation, a "division of labor collective," which resulted in confusion, and typical director/writer/actor hierarchy (109) which eventually gave way to a collective democracy. *Devising Performance* gives excellent examples of group dynamics in devising ensembles, however, it does not go into depth on any process or methodology of how ensembles might build stronger bonds and/or become an egalitarian ensemble.

Through discussions with theatre artists, Duska Radosavljevic (2013) provides insight into the ensemble process with her book *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-makers*. In her introduction, as she defines key terms to lay the groundwork for her interviews, she has, "highlighted potential uses of the term 'ensemble' as applying to anti-hierarchical – art rather than business-oriented – model of working which emphasizes inner interconnectedness between individual members and is often characterized by a commitment to training" (11). Radosavljevic interviews 22 different theatre makers and categorizes her pieces under three subheadings: Redefinitions of Ensemble, Working Processes, and Ensemble and the Audience. *The Contemporary Ensemble* provides details of existing non-hierarchical devising ensembles, however, this project is interested in a process for creating a strong group bond and egalitarian leadership, the illustrations in *The Contemporary Ensemble* do not provide that process.

Although *Leadership Ensemble* (Seifter & Economy, 2001) is a book that was written about a conductor-less orchestra so as to give insight to corporate managers, the book has excellent examples of groups working together, group decision-making, and the process of creating leaders of all group members; “We start by assuming that leaders and followers are equals, and every one of our members is able and expected to function in both roles. By empowering a large group of talented, self-confident musicians to take leadership roles and make decisions, our structure motivates each individual to actively contribute to the achievement of our goals and objectives” (90). The book cites examples of other companies that work with a non-hierarchical structure, and give basic tenets for leadership (103-105) however, there are no insights into a method of connecting individuals to create a cohesive group.

In *Encountering Ensemble*, John Britton (2013) provides essays by other writers to give “snapshots” of organizations. These essays give glimpses into differing perspectives, including Harrop and Jemieson’s “Collaboration, ensemble, devising,” (167): “More optimistically, Etienne Wenger suggests a group that works on a collaborative creative engagement as a ‘community of practice’ can achieve a shared identity and heightened sense of ownership in the process” (169). “Ownership of the process” may be a reason that devisers wish to create work together, however, Harrop and Jemieson offer no specific process to create a collaborative ensemble.

Encountering Ensemble provides theatre makers with multiple sources for inspiration, describes intimate details of devising ensembles, and, at various turns, touches on group process both for directed and non-hierarchical ensembles. This project is searching for a methodology to build a strong group connection that may lead to egalitarian leadership in the process of creating long-form improvisation and, potentially, devised theatre. It is

important to attempt to understand the group dynamics of theatre ensembles and recognize egalitarian performance ensemble models, however, this project is in search of a documented process that will create a strong group bond that might lead to a leaderless performance ensemble.

Measuring Leadership

To measure leadership, I reviewed each session's video/audio record and marked statements and actions that showed leadership. Five different categories of leadership statements or actions were created:

Directive: Is a term I use to describe a leadership statement when a participant made a definitive action or statement to the group, such as "let's begin this exercise," "I have a game we should try," or a physical action that started the whole group moving into a game, exercise or improvisation. When a *Directive* was made, it was clear that the participant was taking the leadership role and others were expected to follow.

Coaching: I use this term to describe when the intention of a statement was to lead the group, but was more passive than a *Directive*; such as when a participant stated, "maybe the group could try this differently," or "you missed an opportunity here, perhaps you should think about it another way," etc. *Coaching*, in this project, was not stated as a command, but, as a suggestion to the group or individual for guidance.

Teaching: For this project, the term is used to describe moments when a participant used past knowledge to pass along new information to the group. Imparting new knowledge on the group shows leadership, so, these moments of illustration and lecture are expressed by using the term *Teaching*.

Leadership Question: There were moments of leadership within the group that were so passive that they were posed to the group in the form of a question with a desired response of group consensus. An example of a Leadership Question might be “should we do a physical warm-up?” “Should we begin?” or “Can we try this exercise first?”

Questioning the Leader: The final bit of leadership terminology for this research project demonstrates who the leader is in any given situation by recognizing when a participant asked a clarification question to a specific person in the group. This shows that the participant was looking to a specific leader for an answer.

Leadership Analysis

Through almost 20 hours of video, I used these five categories of leadership stated above to count moments of leadership in the group. Potential useful data points were grouped as: Total Number of Leadership Statements (by workshop date), Leadership Statements (average per participant- per date), and Percentage of Leadership Statements (per participant) for each workshop date.

Looking first at the Sunday workshop group, we saw that the total number of leadership statements and statements per-person decreased over the term of the workshop.

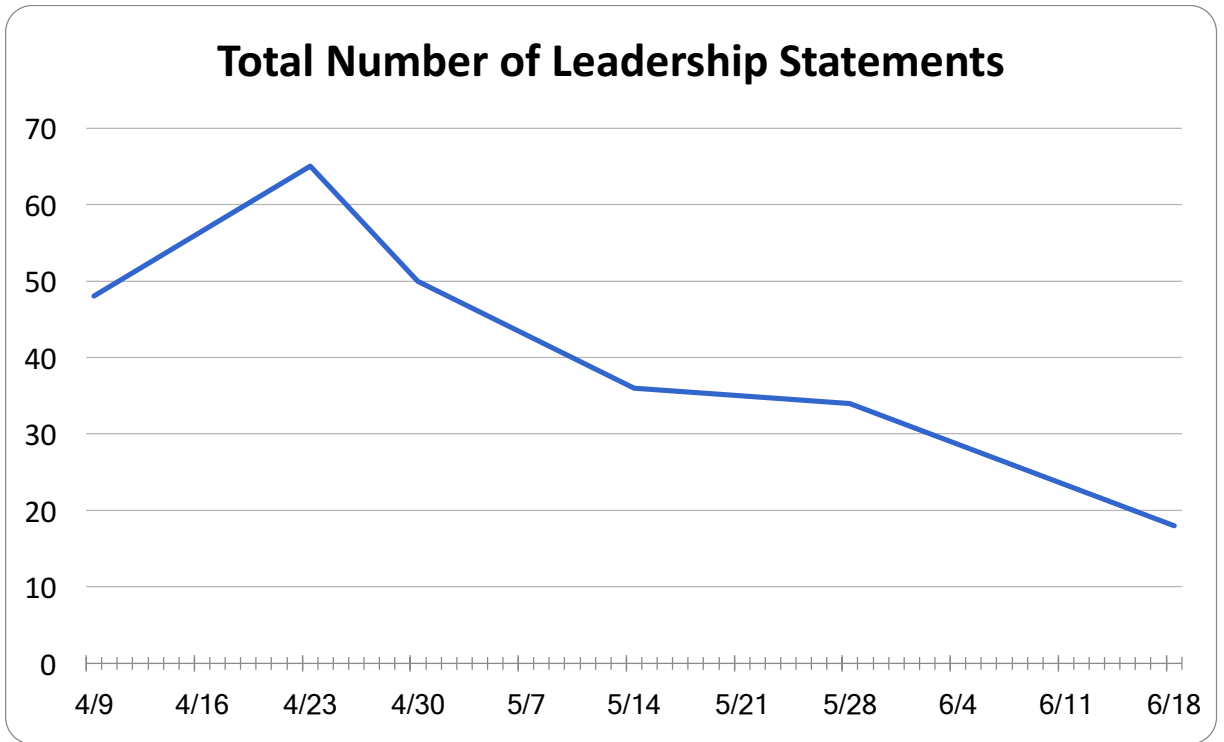


Figure 2

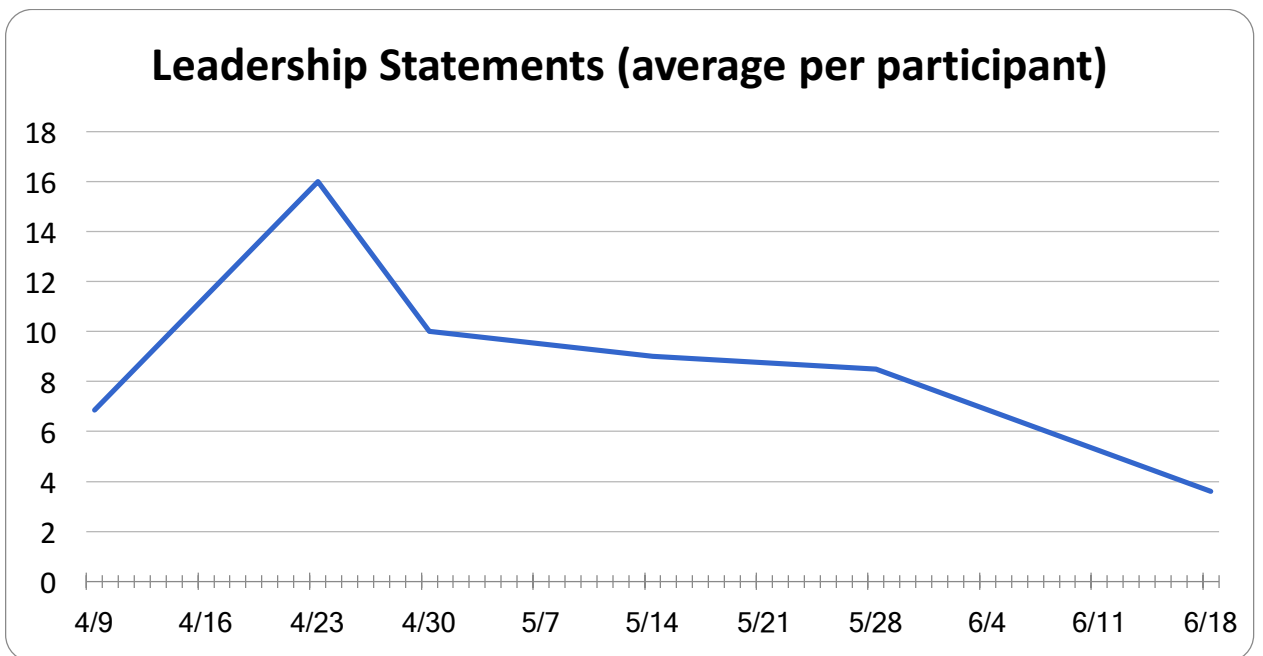


Figure 3

The initial data point for April 9th shows that there were 48 leadership statements (6.8 per participant). The reason that April 9th and April 23rd were significantly different was that we had two more participants in the April 9th meeting, and, as it was an orientation meeting, there was less “training” during that meeting. The April 23rd meeting was instrumental for training the participants in long-form improv and setting the template for each meeting; therefore, there was more instruction from the researcher/program designer. After the April 23rd meeting, we saw a decline in both the number of leadership statements and per-participant number. Some of this decline can be attributed to participants becoming more comfortable with the template of the workshop, however, it seems that, over time, there are more moments of non-verbal agreement between the participants which may point to an increase in Group Mind.

One significant data category is the Percentage of Leadership Statements by Participant. After the researcher counted each leadership point in each workshop and attributed the statement to the correct participant, a percentage of leadership per workshop was attributed using a 100% scale.

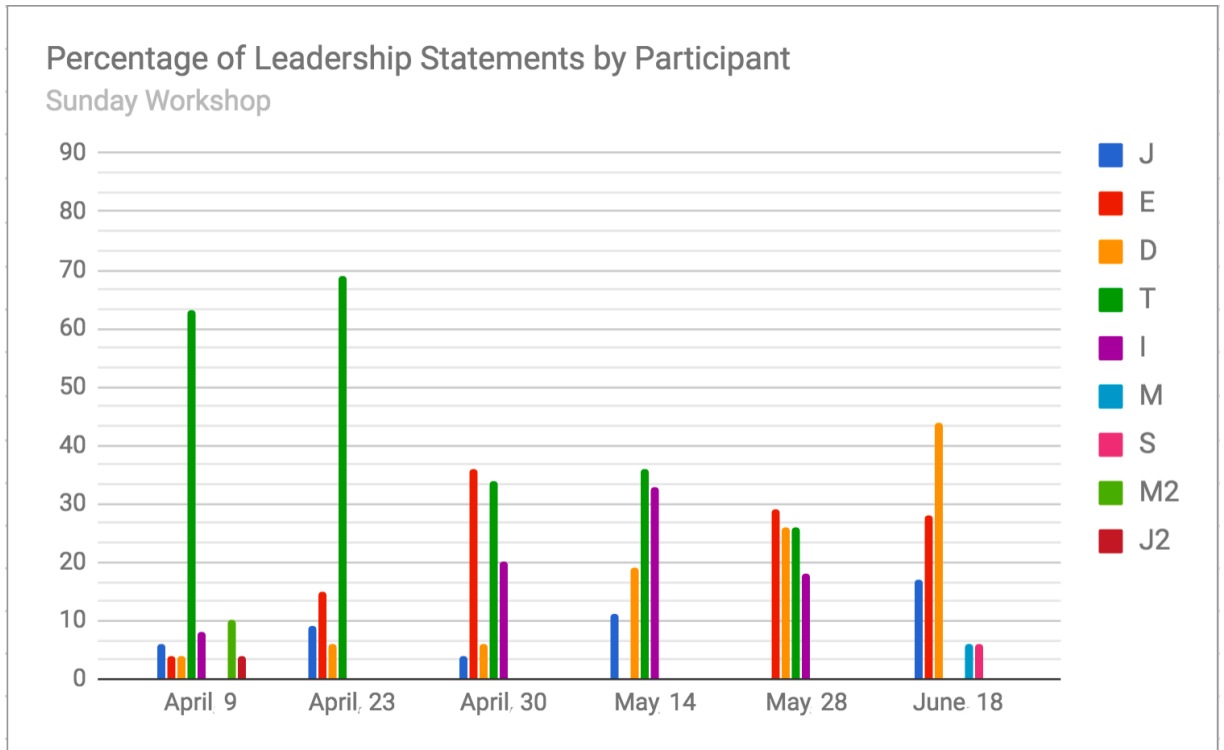


Figure 4

This graph clearly shows that leadership moved away from me (the green bar graph marked “T”) and, by April 30th, the group had begun to take fairly equal turns in leading the group. It should also be noted that on June 18th, the final day of the Sunday group, I did not participate in the workshop and two members of the Wednesday group were invited to participate. On June 18, we see that participant D (Donna) took a larger leadership role; however, leadership was still shared between the participants. The trend for Donna also shows that her amount of leadership increased consistently over the term of the workshop.

The Wednesday workshop shows similar trends:

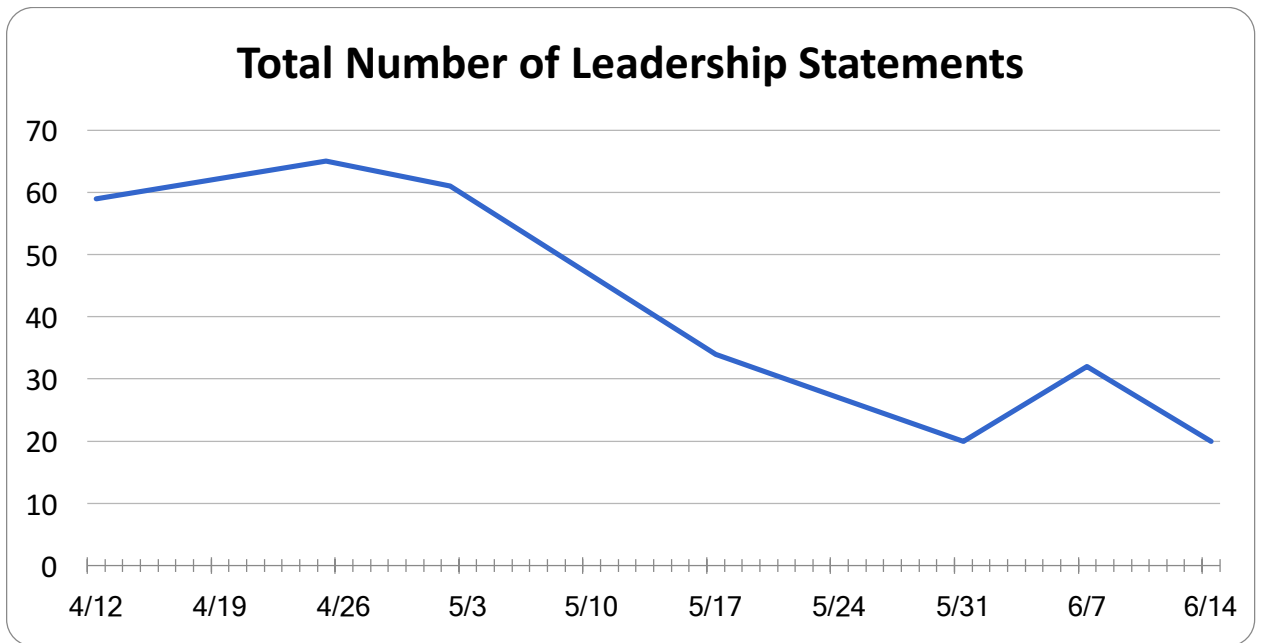


Figure 5

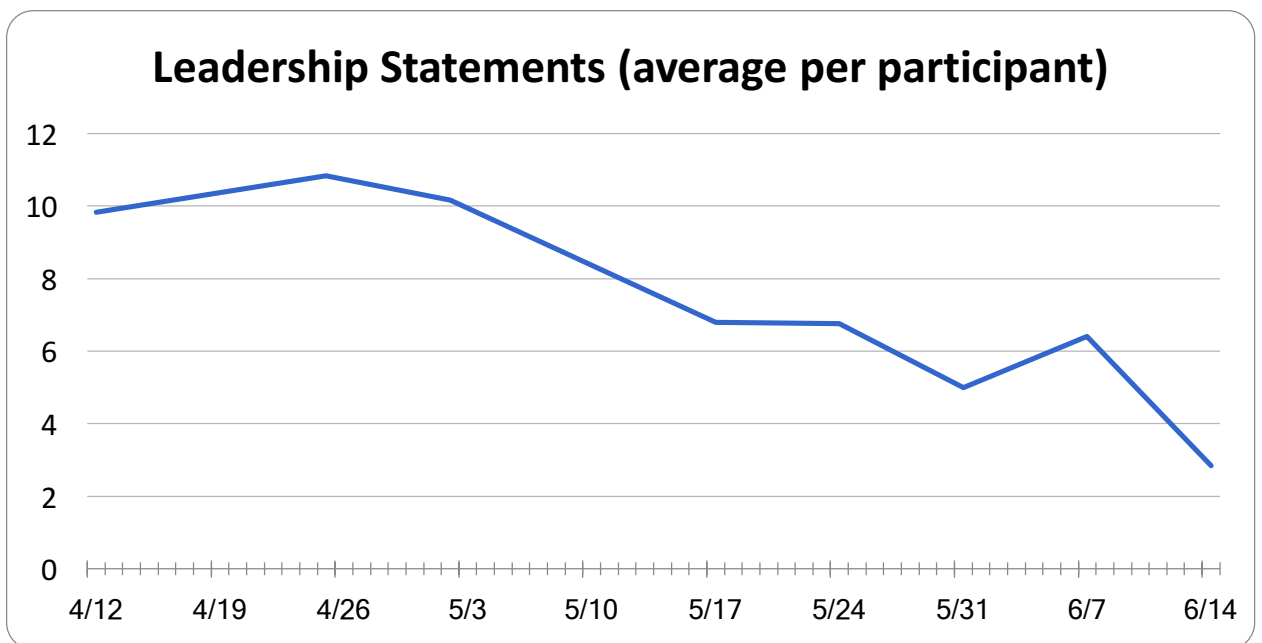


Figure 6

The Wednesday workshop group shows a similar trend to the Sunday workgroup when we look at the total number of leadership statements and the number of statements per person. One thing to note about this control group, participant T2 (Todd) was not a full

participant in the workshop; however, on June 7th, Todd attended the workshop. On the June 7th workshop, I did not participate in the workshop, so a small increase in Leadership Statements can be attributed to the workshop group taking on the role of teacher in this setting as they were, as a group, leading Todd through the workshop training and participation.

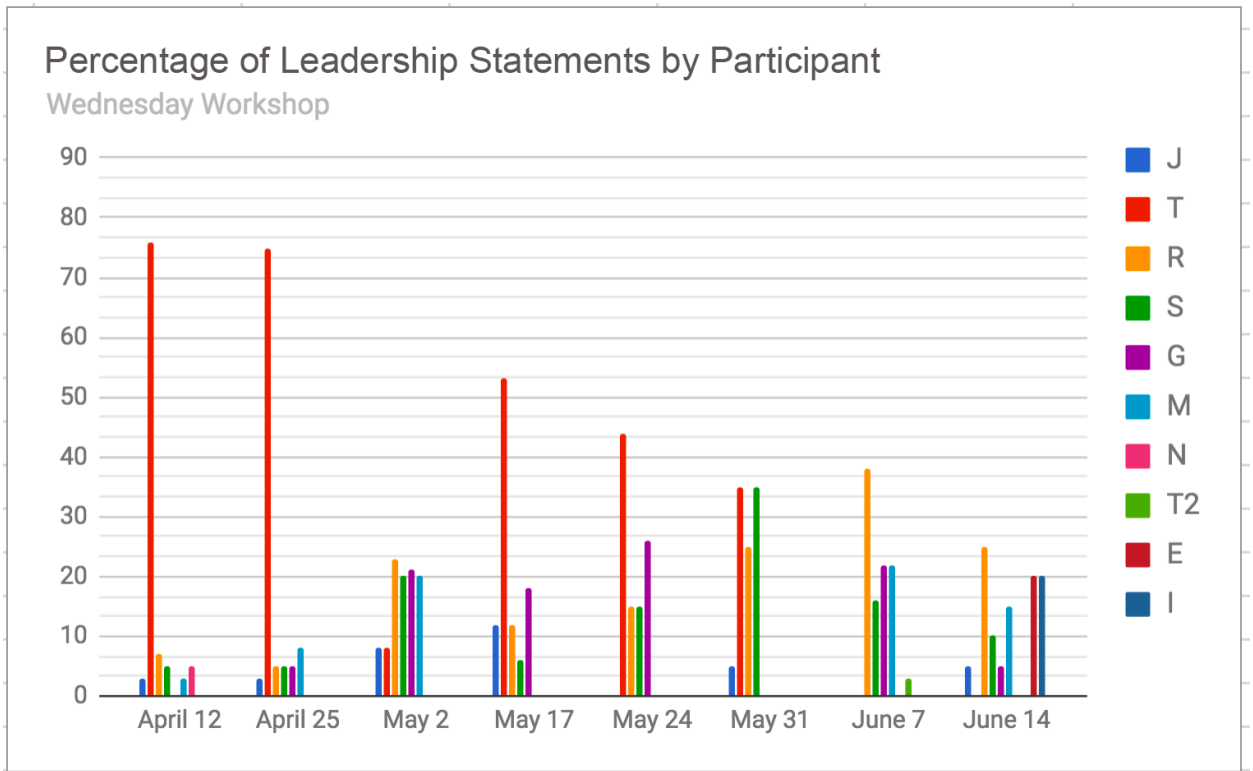


Figure 7

This chart clearly shows that my role of leader (the red line in Fig. 7) diminished over time. On May 2nd, I was absent from the workshop, and there we see that the leadership statements were spread among the participants (%23, 21, 20, 20, 8, 8). June 5th was the date T2 (Todd) entered into the workshop, so, we can see that participant R (Richard) increased his leadership statements with 38%, however, the rest of the group assisted in the leadership (22,22,16,3). Through the video, it is obvious that Richard was taking the lead role due to

Todd's lack of experience with the group and the subject matter. We saw Richard initiate the most leadership statements during this workshop, and, saw a direct hierarchy form between Richard and Todd, as Todd was new to the workshop and Richard had the most experience among the group. June 14, the final day of the Wednesday workshop, two participants from the Sunday group were invited to attend and I did not participate. Wednesday, June 14 saw seven different workshop attendees, with leadership spread between five. Richard (R) had 25% of the leadership statements, Emilie (E) and IO (I) had 20% per participant, Madi had 15%, Sheila 10%, and 5% each for participants Jeanine and Gabe.

For the final two workshops (Wednesday, June 14 and Sunday, June 18), I chose to be removed from the process. So far in the process, leadership had been starting to decentralize, so, I was interested in seeing how the group might react to the absence of the leader/creator. In the May 2nd workshop, I had a scheduling conflict which left the group without the designated leader and we saw the group resort to a very even distribution of leadership.

I also chose to test the groups for transferability; for the final two workshops, two members from the Wednesday group joined the Sunday group and vice versa. The transferability question, as posited during previous workshops, was "with similar training and experience, how quickly and easily might one integrate into a similar group?" Would the new group accept new members knowing they have had a similar training and experience? In both cases, the improvisers integrated easily into the new group, and, since the same set of skills, lessons, and games were conducted at each workshop, the new members were able to easily join the established group and, at times, give leadership. In both cases, the performers listened intently to each other and worked together easily as a leaderless group.

On June 14, participants Emilie and IO attended the Wednesday workshop, but were regular attendees of the Sunday workshop. During the workshop, Emilie and IO both showed 20% leadership during the session, a substantial percentage of leadership for two participants unknown to the Wednesday group. On June 18, however, participant Madi and Sheila joined the Sunday group despite being regular Wednesday attendees. Madi and Sheila only saw 6% leadership on June 18. For this workshop, it seems, that participant Donna took over the role of leader for the group, showing 44% leadership while Emilie earned 28% and Julie 17%. On the video, we saw Donna taking the lead by moving the group forward with more leadership statements than any other member. She had 12 leadership statements in the first 40 minutes of the workshop (timecode 1:35, 2:50, 3:01, 4:03, 4:16, 4:40, 7:55, 12:28, 13:15, 13:24, 13:50, and 40:02). It's also prudent to note that Donna began the workshop with no experience in improvisation and we see in Figure 4 that her leadership statements (participant D) grew each meeting. It appears that Donna took the lead in this workshop session with some assistance from Julie and Emilie while Madi and Sheila were full participants in the Wednesday workshop, so I believe they did not feel immediately confident in the new group and let the regular participants of the Sunday workshop (Donna, Julie and Emilie) lead the group. It is difficult to identify the exact reason that Donna took command of this session, however it is quite an accomplishment since she began the workshop with no improv experience and, through the data, we saw her leadership role increase during each workshop session.

If leadership is evenly distributed among the players of a theatre ensemble, does this assist in creating Group Mind? Can leadership statements prove that shared leadership leads to a stronger bond among the members of the group? Perhaps the process of scene creation

in an improvisation create a supportive environment that creates an atmosphere where participants are willing to share leadership.

3. Agreement

In Chicago, a large segment of the theatre/performance community uses improvisation that has evolved from the work of Viola Spolin. Improvisers laud “agreement” as the basis for creating strong improvisational scenes onstage (Halpern, et al. 1994, Besser, et al. 2013). The building block of saying “Yes &” (agreement) in a scene is instrumental in creating a foothold with which an improvised scene might flourish. Beginning with Spolin in the 1930’s, propagated by her son, Paul Sills, into the fabric of famed Chicago improv troupe The Second City and blossoming into a full-grown mantra with contemporary improvisational ensembles, “Yes &” has morphed from a scene tool into a self-help guidepost. Might the guidelines of comedy/improv give way to a process that will build a successful egalitarian theatre ensemble?

“Yes And” is the supertitle that begins *The Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) Comedy Improvisation Manual* (12), written, collectively, by Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh. Group agreement is so pervasive in the book that the first three chapters find “Yes &” as a major component (12-110). *Truth in Comedy: The manual of improvisation*, by Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, focus on agreement and the group mind. Agreement in a scene, also known as the “Yes &” principal, is the basis of chapter four (45-56).

Mick Napier, founding director of The Annoyance Theatre in Chicago can be seen on YouTube in a presentation for Chicago Ideas Week from 2012 entitled *Mick Napier: A Place of Yes*. In it, Napier states, “one of the most important tenets of improv is ‘acceptance.’ You

must immediately, without judgment, and I mean really without judgment, accept the reality your partner has set up in the scene” (video timecode 3:42). Napier continues, “Creation is such a volatile and precious thing. An idea is so precious. This philosophy extends to the way we create product in sketch comedy and other narrative comedy. In our world, if someone says, ‘I have an idea,’ not only does someone say ‘ok, what is it?’ they go, ‘alright, let’s do it’ “(8:22). Napier goes on to say that nothing can destroy a scene faster than denying an idea in a scene, "One little shrug, one little cross of the arms, one little roll of the eyes, one person sitting away from the group, one person going, 'Tsk. Okay.' One little negative insertion into the volatile and miraculous notion of creating an idea and allowing it to flourish and heighten...one little negative barb can completely destroy that beautiful and precious thing called an idea” (8:52). As he moves past the simple idea of ‘agreement’ and illustrates how the concept may be applied to group dynamics, Napier finalizes his demonstration, “In improvisation, we use those tools in order to create wonderful scenes at deli’s, etc. In the room, we use that, not only to a better quality of life while we are creating- and more fun- but also the realization that everyone’s idea is really valid, and that the time to judge it isn’t now, it’s a little later. And, that while we are creating something, realizing ‘yeah, you can destroy it - like that,’ but it’s much more courageous to add to it, to allow it to flourish, to put your judgment aside, and let creativity live” (9:22) (<https://youtu.be/mYv4vAnnuts>). Agreement, the practice of “Yes &,” became a platform on which our practice would develop.

Many U.S. improv troupes work without a singular leader or director. The art of improvisation takes place on stage without a director, so groups tend to work collaboratively through consensus or with a shared leadership model similar to the loose hierarchy of a jazz or rock band. Even when troupes have a designated director who works with the troupe off

stage, onstage, the performers process is to work as an ensemble making group decisions in the moment and living in a world of “agreement.” In addition to improvisational theatre, “agreement” has been shown as a practice used in other types of ensembles.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra cites examples of “agreement” in the book *Leadership Ensemble*, written by Executive Director Harvey Seifter with Peter Economy (2001). The book explores the group dynamics of an orchestra that works without a conductor and makes all decisions via consensus. In the chapter entitled “Seek Consensus” the writers highlight “Five Assumptions for Agreement” that include the bullet points:

1. Broad agreement about overall goals and objectives
2. Universal acceptance of the rules of the game
3. Dependence on open communication
4. Respect
5. Experimentation

In Britton’s *Encountering Ensemble*, Bryan Brown discusses the concept of *studiinost* when referencing historic Russian ensembles, “*Studiinost* is a process of agreement, one that must be consistently reaffirmed; and so, Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov devised mechanisms to reinforce and perpetuate it (55).” Brown discusses Russian ensembles ethos and organization that leads to a collective ensemble; however, the piece does not mention method or process that groups may explore to build stronger group bonds or shared leadership.

In San Francisco, American Conservatory Theatre was built on a similar platform of agreement. Founding artistic director, William Ball, succinctly describes his philosophy of creative “positation” in his directing manual *A Sense of Direction* (1984): “By the principle of

positionation, we say yes to every creative idea. We accept this principle as a discipline because we have found that doing so yields practical results. What we are talking about has nothing to do with morality; it has nothing to do with ethics. We do not say yes to everything for virtue's sake. We say yes because we understand that to do so is the practical way of sending a message to the intuition that every creative idea will be valued, respected, and used; and when the intuition gets that message often enough, it will send us its most perfect and its most pure creative ideas. That is why, whether we like it or not, saying yes to everything is the most creative technique an artist can employ." Ball continues, "If we can persuade all the individuals in this collaborative art to work within the same system, that is, the system of respect for the intuition- the system of positionation- the collective unconscious flourishes. Everyone's ideas will be vibrant and appropriate. Success will be inevitable" (18-19). Ball's work is certainly philosophical, however, does not offer a working process for building stronger group dynamics or an egalitarian ensemble.

"Plussing" at Pixar animation studios has been described, "As people criticize the work under review, that criticism must always contain a new idea or a suggestion for strengthening the original idea – it must contain a 'plus.' Without plussing, their morning crit(ique) sessions can get pretty negative and emotionally draining," (Burkus, 2012). The concept of "plussing" is, at its core, very similar to "Yes &" in improvisation where a description is featured in Peter Sims 2011 book *Little Bets*.

In Donelson R. Forsyth's psychology text *Group Dynamics*, he discusses positive reinforcement and agreement by citing Jennifer George's work, "George believes that positive group affect will lead to increases in a number of pro-group actions, including helping out other members, protecting the group, making constructive suggestions, and 'spreading goodwill' during interpersonal encounters (George & Brief 1992, p 310)." Forsyth

continues to weigh the opposite of agreement with, “Needless to say, a negative affective tone sets the stage for any number of anti-group actions, including absenteeism, low morale, and conflict (Kelly, 2001, pp 48-49).”

Forsyth discusses ostracism as a “people need to belong is slaked when a group accepts them, but they are most satisfied when a group actively seeks them out. In contrast, people respond negatively when a group ignores or avoids them...” (61), and in mentioning the Sociometer Theory relates that “one of the surest ways to lower individuals’ self-esteem is to reject them” (64). Both of these terms relate to the creation of long-form improvisation scenes. When one player reacts negatively (with a “no, but” instead of a “Yes &”) to another player’s suggestion in a scene, it not only effects the scene and the immediate relationship in the scene, there are potential lasting affects on the group dynamic as a whole.

When examining the term collectivist, Forsyth mentions that collectivists, “...avoid disagreement or dissent (Schwartz, 1994, 2007). A group, to a collectivist, ‘binds and mutually obligates’ each member (Oyserman et al., 2002, p. 5) and so the individual has no right to create disagreement or to disrupt the convened group proceedings. Collectivists prefer, in fact, acquiescence to disagreement and compromise to conflict” (70). In Forsyth’s language, perhaps improvisational ensembles should be termed Collectivists as part of the fabric of building a scene is full agreement.

In the paper *Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams* (2005), Dusya Vera and Mary Crossan discuss the concept of agreement and how it creates a support system among the players with two excellent quotes: “The rule of agreement creates a context in which improvisers are required to accept, support, and enhance the ideas expressed by the other actors on stage,” and, “Because of the principle of agreement, actors know that their content supports experimentation, that their actions are not being judged by fellow players,

and that nothing is seen as a mistake” (207). Crossan and Vera relate the concepts of improvisation to business innovation, “Firms interested in promoting innovation need to incorporate the rule of agreement as a norm of their organizational and team cultures,” and further the concept of agreement in teambuilding, “The norm of agreement is critical for the creation of an experimental culture in teams” (207). Vera and Crossan point clearly to the benefits of agreement when building group dynamics.

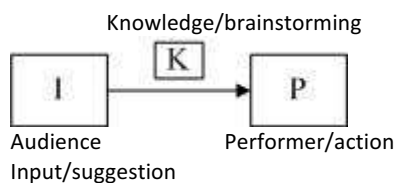
John Lutterbie (2011) discusses agreement in his book *Toward a General Theory of Acting*, “The first rule of improvising is to always say ‘yes’ to what is given; to refuse what another offers or to judge one’s own work prematurely ends the exercise and forecloses the process” (162). Lutterbie conveys improvisations place in binding a group together, “Improvisations extend from personal explorations to collective creations,” and “They engage cognitive processes that allow the performer to explore her interactions with the environment and provide experiences that can shape a performance in profound ways” (163).

Yes & (the process of scene building)

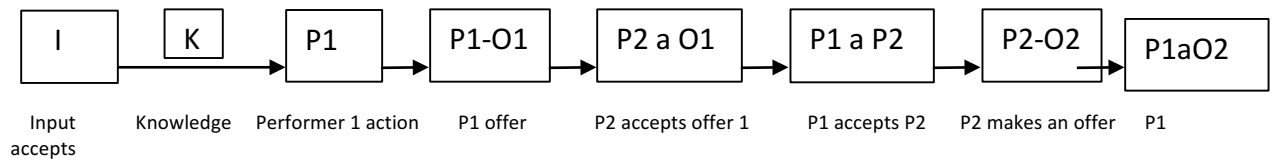
To build scenes in improvisation, usually, the group elicits a suggestion from the audience, then one improviser (or more) begins an action, monologue, or dialogue that is inspired from that audience suggestion. That initial action, monologue, or dialogue is termed an “offer.” Once an offer is put onto the stage, each member of the improv ensemble has an opportunity to accept that offer, reject that offer, or simply refuse to enter the scene. A general tenet of improvisation is to “Yes &” an offer in a scene, most improvisers choose not to “reject” an offer, as it stops a scene and rejects the first improvisers impulse. The term “Yes &” means that a second improviser accepts the offer (the terms of the scene, the

location, character relationships, etc.) and helps to build on that offer by furthering details of the storyline, location, or character relationships. As the scene progresses, the improviser might add a new offer to the scene that, again, may be accepted, rejected, or ignored by the scene partner or another member of the troupe. Each scene is then just a series of offers and acceptances, rejections, or inactions from the other members of the group. If the group feels that a scene is at a good place to end (the scene is losing momentum, or is at an intriguing plot or character juncture), any member of the ensemble might “edit” the scene. The term edit, in improvisation, means to cut the scene and move on to another scene (or move the current scene in time or place). This can be done verbally (often an ensemble member not in a current scene might yell “cut to...” which instructs the performers in the scene to another location or time), or non-verbally with a “wipe” where an actor runs downstage of the current scene playing to force an end to the scene. After a wipe, a new scene may begin (Halpern, et al. 1994, Besser, et al. 2013).

Baumer and Magerko (2009) created a diagram that attempts to map the process of improvisation:



The audience gives a suggestion; the improviser uses his/her knowledge and brainstorming skills then steps forward to initiate a scene. To continue with the Baumer and Magerko diagram concept, a typical beginning to an improvised scene may be mapped as follows:

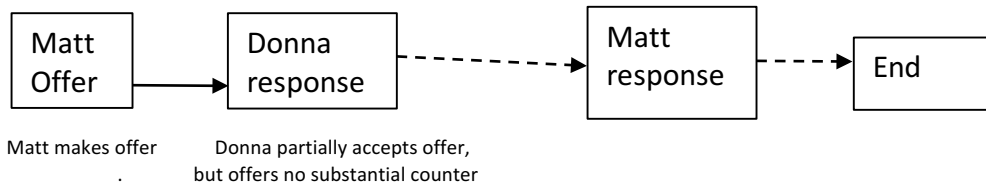


This type of flowchart mapping is useful as a visual diagram for how improvisational scenes are tracked. In the Buamer and Magerko diagrams, it is helpful to be able to pinpoint where players “offers” occur, and it tracks the “Yes &” concept easily.

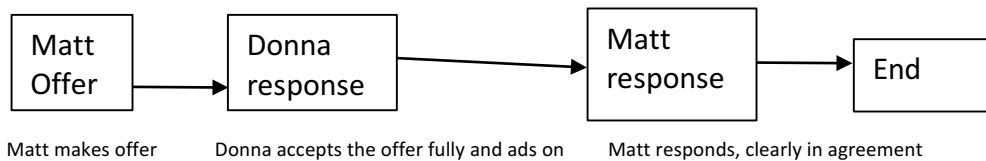
Agreement Analysis

In looking at the very first set of workshops, we see many instances of players starting to work with the concept of “agreement” in a scene. The first exercise introduced to each group was Three Line Scene, a “drill” game where one player starts a scene, the second player responds with an affirming statement and adds on to that statement, and the first player responds. This is a very short, elementary game that introduces the concepts of “starting a scene in the middle (little exposition), staying away from questions (not putting the pressure on the scene partner) and adding on to an agreement. In the video document from April 9 at timecode 17:53:12, we see Matt begin the scene with a statement, firmly planting the scene at a hair salon and accosting the woman who failed his haircut; however, Donna takes the scene differently. Although Donna plays the scene with the original line in mind, she was not listening intently and did not register that Matt had endowed her with the character of the hair dresser; so, this scene was not in full agreement which led to slight confusion about which direction the scene might take if the scene were to continue. The

next time Donna and Matt entered into a scene together (timecode 21:00:00) we can see that Matt made the offer of a student going to a teacher to raise his grade, we see Donna take that offer and make a new offer (of sex) to Matt, then Matt makes a counter offer of tutoring. In just three minute's time, we see the group beginning to gain the concept of agreement. A map of Matt and Donna's first scene is represented below:



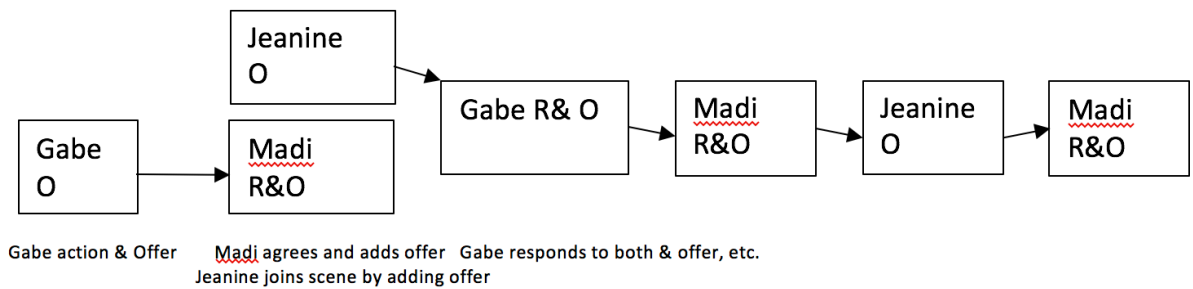
In this map, the broken lines represent a broken agreement or moment of confusion. The second scene is much more clear and can be mapped by the following:



As this map is an analysis of the exercise Three Line Scene, there is a quick ending to the improvisation after just three lines; an offer, a response with a potential second offer, then a final response/counter offer. As this demonstrates, agreement (Yes&) is a building block of improvisation (Halpern 2006; Halpern et al, 1994; Besser et al, 2013).

In the May 2nd workshop, documented at timecode 15:26, we see the Wednesday workshop group beginning to master the use of agreement in scene building. Within 11 seconds we can see Gabe start the scene, Madi joins in agreement with his scene and Jeanine adds on to the scene. The group uses this series of agreements and add-ons to create a session of improvisational scenes that continue, uninterrupted and without denial

until the group finds an ending at 42:27:00 just about 27 minutes of improvisation that begins to build a larger storyline. The section discussed maps as such:



On the June 14th video log, we see that the proficiency in the agreement technique has expanded considerably; the group masters a session of improvisation that is 59 minutes long (timecode 24:02:00- 1:22:52:00). One interesting moment in this hour-long session is at the start (timecode 25:06:00) when Sheila actually has a fault in agreement. In the previous scene, IO was shoveling asphalt with Emilie when Sheila turns the shoveling activity into the activity of “shoveling shit” instead of asphalt which then eventually leads to her making the joke that if they got a fan in there, then the “shit would hit the fan.” Although this is a disagreement from the earlier scene, IO takes the gift given from Sheila and uses it to propel the scene forward. IO then, at timecode 1:22:43, brings back the term “shit hit the fan” as a way to cap the entire session. The entire session is a chain of offers, agreements, acceptance, and counter offers which creates an improvisation with continuing storylines which form the basis of long-form improvisation.

Long-Form Improvisation

The form of improvisation used in the project is known as Long-Form. To begin most improvisations, typically, improvisers get a suggestion from an audience member and then use that suggestion to create a “real-time” performance piece that incorporates the

audience suggestion. If the group is in rehearsal, the suggestion may be from a member of the troupe or, as sometimes used in this project, a smartphone application that generates random words. While short-form improvisation is built around a structure of “games” that may be completed in a short amount of time with a definite ending (usually two to five minutes), long-form improvisation has a more complex structure or becomes a series of scenes that discovers its own structure (Halpern, et al. 1994, Besser, et al. 2013, Johnstone 1992).

Examples of Short-Form improv games are “A to Z” (a 26-line scene where each line in the scene starts with the next letter of the alphabet), “Film Critics” (where the scene is formatted to have three short scenes with two film critics in a television studio where the critics discuss scenes from a movie which is played out in real time by other members of the troupe), and “Party Quirks” (where one improviser attempts to guess the quirks the audience has given three other players while playing a scene from a party), all made popular by the improvised television program *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (2010). Each of these three games has an established beginning, middle, and end for the scene; the “game” has set up a structural parameter for the content (narrative) of the scene (Improv Encyclopedia 2009).

Examples of long-form “games” are Armando Diaz and The Harold (Besser, et al. 2013). Both games set a template from which improvisers continue with a series of offers, agreements, counter offers, and more agreement to build a cohesive group of scenes that work around a common theme, characters, or story arc. There is no definite end to the game. The end of the game occurs at a logical conclusion point that can be initiated by any member of the ensemble, a feeling from the entire group, or, at times the person running the lighting board is empowered to end a scene if they are truly connected to the group. The Harold is a “game” that has a detailed structure (Halpern, et al. 1994). The Harold begins by

eliciting just one audience suggestion which then serves as a platform on which to build a playlet that has the structure of a three-act play. Using this structure, the end of a Harold is at a conclusion point somewhere in “act 3” of the improvisation (usually 20-50 minutes of improvisation). In addition, long-form relies on the re-use of information from previous scenes; an actor builds a scene at the beginning of the long-form session, then the next time that scene is explored, information from the previous scene (and any other scene between) is incorporated into the improvisation; which illustrates how crucial “listening” is in an improvisational scene.

From my experience with this project, using the “Yes &” skill in long-form improvisation, making a statement then having other players add on to that statement, results in a succession of agreements. This succession of agreements builds confidence within the group with each passing scene and, with positive reinforcement that occurs, helps to create a strong bond among the players. Through my work in long-form improvisation, it seems that “agreement” or saying “Yes &” could be a key for egalitarian theatre ensembles to build strong working relationships, create strong pieces, and foster an environment that is conducive to group creation and achieving “group mind.”

Group Mind

In improvisational theatre, Group Mind (Johnstone 1992, Halpern, et al. 1994, Besser, et al. 2013), refers to groups that are in tune to one another, groups that anticipate each other’s movements, actions, and intentions and “fill the gaps” to create a seamless event for an audience. I have found, at times, a strong connection among the players while performing improvised scenes, perhaps scene building techniques found in improvisation can help create a synergy among the performers on a consistent basis.

Spolin (1963), through her voice as a teacher, gives sound reason for ensemble work, “A healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution. If one person dominates, the other members have little growth or pleasure in the activity; a true group relationship does not exist” (9). She further explores the meaning of ensemble in her section titled “Group Expression” (9-12). In the appendix of her book, Spolin has the section “definition of terms” where she speaks of “non-directional blocking” (386) (understanding the stage picture without a director) and “group agreement” (383).

Long-form improvisation troupes often work without a director, and one might argue that they devise a new improvisational work with each performance. Charna Halpern (2006), the founder of Improv Olympic in Chicago [recently renamed IO, no connection to the person (IO) in this workshop], gives insight into this style in her book *Art by Committee*. Halpern uses a term pervasive in this Chicago improv scene: “group mind.” In *Art by Committee*, she heads a section entitled “Group Mind through Movement and Your Responsibility to Support the Lemming Cause” (67), where she explains the concept and gives insights into achieving group collective consciousness on stage (67-70).

“Group mind” also makes its way into *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* (Besser, et al. 2013), “Group mind is how a team incorporates multiple, individual voices into one single voice. A team with strong group mind will not generate information in isolation” (220).

In *Truth in Comedy* (Halpern, et al 1994), The Group Mind is a subheading and occupies two pages in the book (92,93). Support and Trust is the title of chapter three as the authors spend six pages emphasizing this building block of ensemble work (37-42).

D.R. Forsyth (2006) has thoughts on Group Mind from his text *Group Dynamics*, “Very few of these investigators, however, believed that groups literally had minds. They used such concepts as groupmind and collective conscious as metaphors to suggest that many psychological processes are determined, in part, by interactions with other people, and those interactions are in turn shaped by the mental activities and actions of each individual in the collective” (17). However, Forsyth continues to explore groups with the social exchange theory “when individuals join groups, they forego exclusive control over their outcomes. Groups create interdependence among members, so that the actions of each member potentially influence the outcomes and actions of every member” (49). The theory seems to suggest that groups may be able to achieve a collective mindset (not mind) when approaching a creative situation, such as devising theatre, where the outcome is something the group has envisioned. The phrase “forego exclusive control over their outcomes” (49), directly correlates to improvisation techniques of playing the scene without pre-planning the outcome of the scene.

The improvisational community that descends from Chicago theatre maker Viola Spolin and her son Paul Sills (founder of The Compass Players and Second City theatre) (Coleman 1990, Sweet 2004), uses the term Group Mind when referring to a sense of ensemble (Halpern, et al. 1994, Besser, et al. 2013, Johnstone 1992). In devising original theatre with an egalitarian ensemble, is there a way to lay a foundation via exercises and techniques that will help build Group Mind for every performance, every rehearsal, and every meeting? Is Group Mind just a feeling of connectedness, or is it a situation where all members of the group share in equal leadership? I feel that Group Mind is a term that may best describe the ensemble connection, and, perhaps, using training and game techniques from long-form improvisation can consistently benefit groups in the quest toward achieving

a strong group dynamic. Through a series of workshops, with two separate groups, over the course of two months, this project explored the effect of specific improvisational training techniques on group cohesion, group dynamics, leadership and the search for the Group Mind.

4. Active-Empathic Listening

It is essential in long-form improvisation to be able to extrapolate details from a previous improvisational scene to use in a current or future improv scene; Keith Johnston in *Impro* illustrates, “The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still ‘balance’ it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them” (116). It requires each player to listen intently to be able to use previous information in a current scene. As the project progressed, participants, on several occasions, mentioned the need for “deep listening.” Through my research, I recognized a parallel between our use of the term “deep listening” and a term used in the field of communications: Active Empathetic Listening. “Empathetic listening is to be respectful of the dignity of others. Empathetic listening is a caring, a love of the wisdom to be found in others whoever they may be” (Bruneau, 1993). As improvisation is communication that happens in real-time, it is essential that the players are listening intently. Studies in listening have shown that it is essential in creating and maintaining relationships (Nelson-Jones, 2006), “a kind of human behavior that almost everyone thinks is important” (Weaver, 1972, p.24), and performs essential communication functions (Bodie, 2011). Is empathic listening a key to creating a stronger group bond? Does improvisation promote empathic listening?

In the communications field, Ridge (1993) provides an extensive list of competencies associated with strong listening that provides performers with goals to better increase their listening skills. Ridge breaks listening down into receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding (5,6). In the project, when the Sunday group first started to focus on “listening” as a skill they wished to develop, I used Ridge’s list as a template for discussion. In the “receiving stage” the group needed to: prepare to listen, discern intentional information, concentrate on stimuli relevant to the scene, be mindful of the selection and attention process, follow the flow of the scene, and “avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking in order to maintain your ability to receive stimuli and listen” (5,6). Similarly, Ridge’s working points for listeners to better interpret (identifying key points, using contextual clues, aware of silences and their meanings, and noting the tone of the other players) and recall (repeat, rephrase, etc.) were most helpful in identifying aspects of “deep listening” for our working groups.

In this project, we saw improvisers listening intently to each other, as the future of any long-form improvisation depends on information from past scenes to build into a coherent audience experience. The players must keep a deep attention to not only the language used, but the emotional content of the other performers and continue to attempt to keep focus on the scene and not let the mind wander off course. This parallels the study of Wolvin & Coakley (1993) in the attempts to refocus attention on listening. Hargie (2011) shows that active listening is much more than “hearing”; it is both verbal and non-verbal, it includes smiling, eye contact, body posture, facial expressions, head nods, etc., and other cues such as verbal sounds or evidence of the absence of listening by fidgeting or doodling. Noticing such details as listed by Hargie is essential to improvisers.

Active Listening is a term used when the listener gives specific cues back to the initial talker that lets them know they are being heard and understood. Head nods, smiles, eye contact, leaning forward or verbal cues such as repeating sections of what was just said, saying things like “yes,” “I see,” or even syllabic cues like “uh, huh” (Colman, 2006; Rothwell 2010). Therefore, using the aforementioned cues to display Active Listening and getting emotionally involved in the information being told, the listener is said to be engaging in active-empathetic listening (Bodie 2011). In addition, over 30 years of research in communications have shown that emotional support of listeners is categorized as verbal person centeredness (VPC) and nonverbal immediacy (NVI) in support of the listening process (Burlison, 2003; Jones, 2004). VPC is used when messages from one person are legitimized by acknowledging and/or elaborating on the initial information in a verbal way (Burlison, 1994). NVI refers to the non-verbal cues (as mentioned above) that listeners use to let the speaker know they are being heard (Corker & Burgoon, 1987; Andersen & Andersen 2005). Another way of non-verbally acknowledging that the speaker is being heard is if the listener begins to mirror the speaker (Bruneau, 1993). Mirroring is also a technique used in improvisation (Besser et al, 2013; Halpern 2006).

Listening Analysis

Reviewing video of the moments on April 9th cites an example of performers not listening intently: the initial Three-Line Scene game with Matt and Donna. At timecode 17:55:00, Matt presented the offer of the “worst haircut” to Donna and obviously endowed Donna with the character of the person who cut his hair, but, we see a blank look on Donna’s face and no recognition that she has understood Matt’s initial offer. Her response was indirectly involved to Matt’s offer with “it looks like you got a haircut,” which was devoid of

the recognition that she was intended to portray the hairdresser. When we look at their next scene together, at 20:59:00, Matt made the offer that he was an athlete that had come to a teacher for help. When he made his offer, we saw Donna begin to smile, a recognition that she has heard him, then she continued the scene with a sexual advance. Matt gave a slight nod of the head, indicating that he was listening to her offer; then he replied with an offer of doing “individual tutoring sessions.” At that last line of the scene, we saw Donna nod at Matt in recognition that she understood his final offer.

Another example of listening can be found on the video of the May 2nd workshop, starting at timecode 15:32:06. Gabe began the scene with an offer (about Pokemon which was just used in the warm-up game). As he spoke, Madi smiled and nodded her head, and Jeanine (from the line behind) sees Gabe physically pushing his Pokemon cards out of the way, then she joined the scene as a Pokemon character. Since Jeanine took on the role as that character, Madi began to name Pokemon characters that Gabe supposedly deleted. Gabe mentioned the word “deleted” right after Madi does. Gabe mentions that he made “an actual Picachau” and Madi fawned over Jeanine like a puppy. The group intently listened to each other. Through the excitement Gabe brought to making his Picachau, the excitement Madi showed, and as Jeanine played the Picachau, all three players exhibited active empathic listening.

Looking back again on the June 14th workshop, at timecode 24:12:02, we saw Emilie begin a scene with IO. Emilie made the initial offer, IO’s facial expression showed Emilie that she was listening, then, IO responded with another offer. Emilie began the scene with the motion of shoveling, IO joined her (mirroring the movement). Emilie took on the persona of a “work foreman” and IO the worker who was not enthralled about working. In this section, the responses matched the offers both verbally and physically; they both explored the

concept of heat and exhaustion. This entire scene was inspired by the word “goggle” which was stated in the warm-up section by Sheila at 21:47:08.

Active-Empathic Listening Scale

One tool to analyze active-empathetic listening is the Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS) developed by Drollinger et al (2006) and refined by Bodie (2011). Using a seven-point scale and 12 statements for the participants to grade, AELS has shown to be a useful tool in communications study that breaks the analysis into “sensing,” “processing,” and “responding.” I administered the scale once to each of the groups and found that after the course of the project, participants believed that they were active-empathic listeners:

Active Empathic Listening Scale (AELS) – a 7 point scale														
	Wednesday Group, June 14, 2017								Sunday Group, June 18, 2017					
Sensing														
I am sensitive to what others are not saying	6	2	4	6	5	6	4.8		4	4	6	4	3	4.2
I am aware of what others imply but do not say	6	4	6	7	5	6	5.7		5	5	6	5	4	5.0
I understand how others feel	6	2	5	7	6	5	5.2		4	6	6	6	6	5.6
I listen for more than just the spoken words.	7	4	7	7	5	6	6.0		6	6	6	7	4	5.8
Average Sensing							5.4							5.2
Processing														
I assure others that I will remember what they say	6	6	4	5	3	5	4.8		7	2	6	5	5	5.0
I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate	6	2	4	7	6	4	4.8		5		5	3	7	5.0
I keep track of points others make	6	4	6	7	6	5	5.7		4	7	6	7	5	5.8
Average Processing							5.1							5.3

Responding															
I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgements	7	4	7	4	5	6	5.5			7	5	6	5	7	6.0
I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.	6	3	6	6	3	6	5.0			3	5	6	7	5	5.2
I ask questions to show my understanding of others' positions	6	4	5	5	5	6	5.2			4	6	5	6	7	5.6
I show others that I am listening by my body language.	7	7	7	5	5	5	6.0			7	7	7	6	7	6.8
Average Responding							5.4								5.9

Figure 1

After taking the AELS, both the Wednesday and Sunday groups showed encouraging scores in all categories. The Wednesday group felt equally strong in the Sensing and Responding categories with 5.4 scores in each category and a 5.1 score in Processing. The Sunday group felt most confident in the Responding category with 5.9 with Sensing scoring 5.2 and Processing at 5.3. Data from the AELS suggest that after performing the tasks of long-form improvisation, groups feel as if they are deeply listening and sharing that they are listening with the group.

I did not discover the AELS survey before the start of my work; however, I created a comparative study by surveying artists and board members of the theatre company for which I work (Maryland Ensemble Theatre). This survey group consists of artists and passionate theatre attendees, and may skew more empathic than the general public. This scale was very helpful in surveying both research groups, comparing their results, and gaining consistent language among the participants to discuss their listening skills.

The scores of both research groups as compared to an AELS survey of ensemble and board members of Maryland Ensemble Theatre (Appendix V), show that the workshop group

gains ground over the comparative survey in the Processing section of the AELS (over .5 points higher), and some improvement in the Responding section of the scale (.1 to .5 points higher); however, the Sensing portion of the survey remains very similar to the MET comparative survey. Building an improv scene depends on listening, and to be able to emotionally connect with fellow performers, one must have empathy; through this lens, we see that improvisers are using active-empathic listening to be able to create a scene.

Using the lexicon of the AELS, both groups became proficient in describing listening by Sensing, Processing, and Responding. Overall, there is evidence that the workshop techniques did require participants to “listen deeply” and the participants utilized the language and skills of Active Empathetic Listening within the practice of the workshops. Long-form improvisation requires intense listening, and this project provided a space where the performers could exercise and develop listening skills.

5. Cognitive Styles

There have been many studies and writings about cognition in creativity. Lawrence Halprin’s *RSVP Cycles* (1970) uses the terms Resources (human and physical from which to work), Scores (the process), Valuation (analysis and selection of resources), and Performance (the result of the score and the style of the process) when elaborating on the cognitive process of creation. Research into cognition in music (Pressing, 2001; Reinholdsson, 1998; Riedl & Young 2006) and, more specifically music improvisation (Johnson-Laird, 2002) give insight into the cognitive process of the creating artist. Baumer and Magerko (2009) reviewed cognition in theatre improvisation from the perspective of the creation of narrative, and “An Empirical Study of Cognition and Theatrical Improvisation”

(Magerko, et al 2009) gives excellent insight into the cognitive process of improvisers, however, this study's focus is on short-form improvisation games.

Theatre improvisers produce work by creating in real time. They receive input (both physical and verbal), process that information analytically, and emotionally, then produce an output that another improviser will now accept as a new input (Pressing 2001). Improvisers are in a constant state of decision making that is specific to the moment, uses real-world knowledge, and is a continuous serial process (Mendonca & Wallace, 2004; Wallis & Shepherd, 2002; Weick 1998).

The decision cycle in Newell's Unified Theory of Cognition (Newell 1990) that was distilled and highlighted by Magerko et al (2009), appears to be an effective model when reviewing the nature of improv scene building. With Newell, cognitive acts are grouped into sections such as:

1. Input: when receiving new information
2. Elaboration: creating new knowledge based on previous knowledge or inputs
3. Proposal: adding new actions, or goals to attain
4. Selection: of one of the proposed actions or goals
5. Execution: playing out the action or goal that was decided

Newell's decision cycle draws parallels to the art of building an improvised scene. At the beginning of the creation of an improvisation, when a player gets a suggestion from the audience or generates a word via smartphone application, the process parallels the terminology "input" as stated from Newell's work. That initial input is elaborated by individual, internal brainstorming which eventually leads to a proposal (offer) of a scene. The second player that enters the scene then helps select the proposal (accepts or rejects

the offer) and finally the group executes one of the goals stated earlier in the scene set.

Other cognitive processes found in the act of improvising are inference, schema generation, mental imagery, theory of mind, and most certainly, decision-making (Magerko, et al 2009).

Improvisers use inference to gain much information from a scene in the present that they can then use in future scenes. They gain information such as location, plot, action, and goals through inference. Schema Generation is a way for improvisers to build characters and a template for structuring a scene. Of course, Mental Imagery is a major tool used in improvising scenes. Usually, improvisers work with just a few chairs and no props or scenery; therefore, all settings and props are inferred to the audience through mental imagery. Improvisers must visualize the setting and let it affect their performance and choices. Members of an improv group share a common framework of knowledge that can be referred to as Shared Mental Models (Cannon-Bowers, etc. 2001; Mathieu, 2002). For a Shared Mental Model to exist, the groups thought and shared experience are in harmony with one another as they are “living in the same reality” in the context of an improvised scene. When two or more members of the group do not match (do not accept the offer, either by choice or by ignorance), we may use the term Cognitive Divergence (Magerko et al. 2009); however, if the disagreement is resolved it is called Cognitive Convergence.

Cognitive Analysis

In the June 14th example, we saw the initial input of “goggles” from Sheila’s story about swimming and it becomes the impetus for Emilie to begin her scene with IO. Emilie elaborated that idea to include work, a status where she was the boss and IO was the worker, and acted out physically by shoveling asphalt. IO added on to that with a proposal that she “does not want to be there” and they both added the proposals that they were tired

and hot. They were both in agreement that the job, location, and status were where the scene began. Through the selection process, then, they executed the digging and quitting phase of the work. As one can clearly see in the video, Emilie and IO were not actually on a job site shoveling asphalt; they used inference and mental imagery to create the vision of goggles, shovels, a hot day at work and exhaustion. There was a cognitive convergence between the two as they agreed on all of the principals of the scene, location, characters, and emotional state; however, when Sheila arrived and changed the already established product from asphalt to excrement, we saw a cognitive divergence at 25:19:00 timecode. Sheila altered the scene and used a physicality that was not consistent with the shoveling from the previous scene; so, we saw IO breathe for a moment to recover. It seems that Sheila decided that she would “push her own agenda” by trying to steer the scene away from the already established reality; this may have been due to her lack of improv experience, or it’s possible that she was trying to take control in the scene because she thought she had a better idea. Ultimately, the idea of “pushing your own agenda” and/or stepping over another player’s already established reality in a scene is detrimental to the scene and does not assist in creating a strong group dynamic.

The May 2 footage showed visual evidence of a similar nature. The initial input of Pokemon from a warm-up game served as the inspiration for Gabe to start an improvisation about a person with a Pokemon addiction who was hiding it from his partner, Madi. Jeanine joined in on the scene and elaborated on the concept that there was a live Pokemon character in the scene. Gabe proposed that he had created the character and Madi accepted that and then decided she loved the character (Jeanine). In this scene, again with all improvised scenes, we need a mental image to begin (a home, Pokemon cards on the floor, the image that Jeanine is actually an animated character, etc.). In improvisation, the players

use a shared mental model as a means of creating space, locations, props, costumes, and other visualizations that help the audience “believe” in a scene.

In the April 9th workshop, since it was just a starting point for agreement with the Three-Line scene game, we had little to draw from. This game did not begin with input from elsewhere, so, Matt had to create that input himself by putting himself into the hair salon and he elaborated on the idea that Donna gave him a bad haircut. We had cognitive divergence when Donna missed that input and only commented on his hair, not taking the cue to become the hairdresser. Matt attempted to bring the scene back to convergence; however, since the scene was only three lines, we did not get to witness a recovery.

6. The Player’s Perception

As I was hoping to track the attitudes of the players in regard to leadership and group cohesion, I developed a six-statement survey (each question rated on a 10-point scale for truthfulness) that would be given to each improviser at the completion of each workshop. After the first workshop, only three statements would be rated, as the remaining four questions were only applicable after the initial meeting. “Leadership today was shared evenly among the players” was intended to gauge the feeling of participants regarding shared leadership. There were two statements about the work; “The quality of today’s work was strong,” and “The work is taking shape.” These two statements were hoping to gauge participant enthusiasm and comfort level with improvisation. The remaining three questions were specifically intended to gauge group connection: “In today’s workshop, there was a strong connection among the players,” “Today I felt a stronger connection to my fellow

workshop participants than during the last workshop” and “The group connection is getting stronger.”

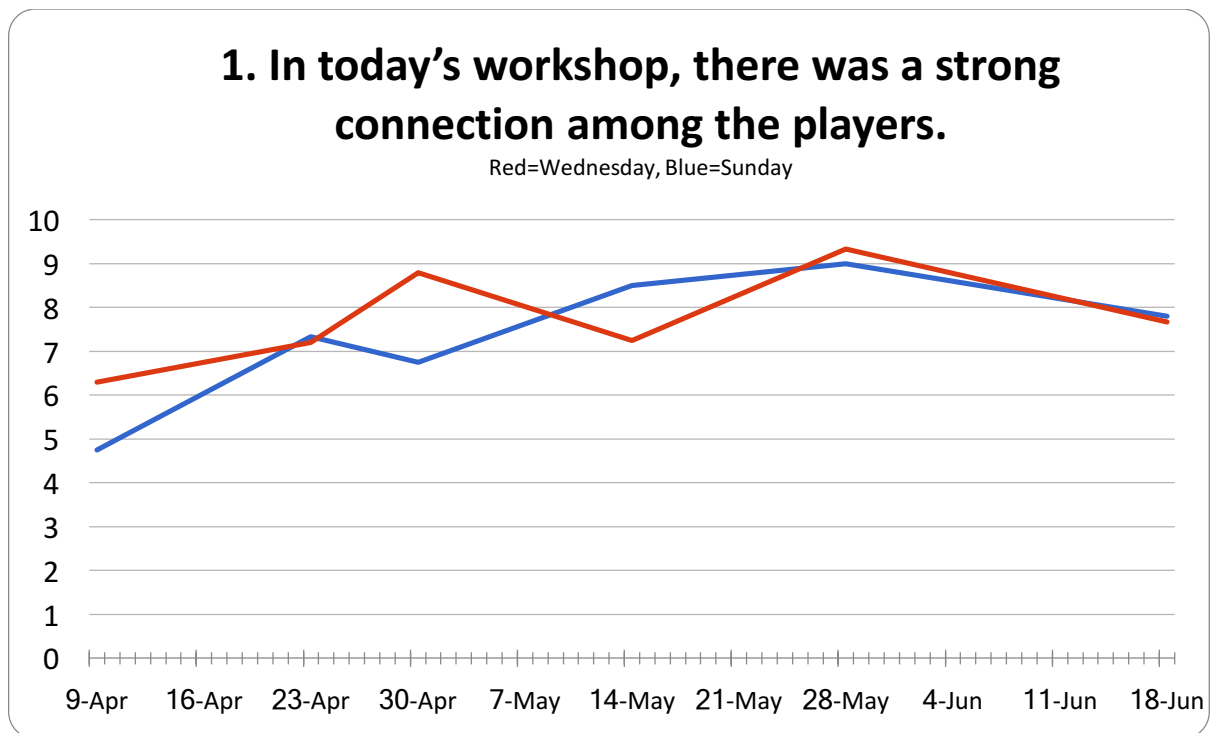


Figure 8

Both workshop groups showed growth in their attitudes toward the connection to the other players in the group. There was a slight downward trajectory in both groups toward the final workshops, and, this may have been attributed to the fact that there were new people in the final workshops. In the Wednesday group, on June 7th we had a new improviser, Todd, in the group. Todd had committed to the workshop group from the start,

but had scheduling conflicts for every single workshop except the second to last. The group agreed (via verbal consensus) to allow him to attend the workshop. Looking back on the Leadership by Participant graph, we can see that I was not present for this workshop, however, Richard (R) seems to have taken on the role of leader to teach Todd about the various functions and traditions of the group. In addition, the final two workshops of each group (Wednesday and Sunday) each had two participants from the other group join them for the final workshop. My hope in doing this was to see how easily members from the Wednesday group might integrate with the Sunday group and vice versa. I feel that this did trigger a slightly lower feeling in connection to the group, however, you can see that even with complete strangers entering into those workshop groups that the attitude toward group was higher than the first two weeks of workshops for both groups.

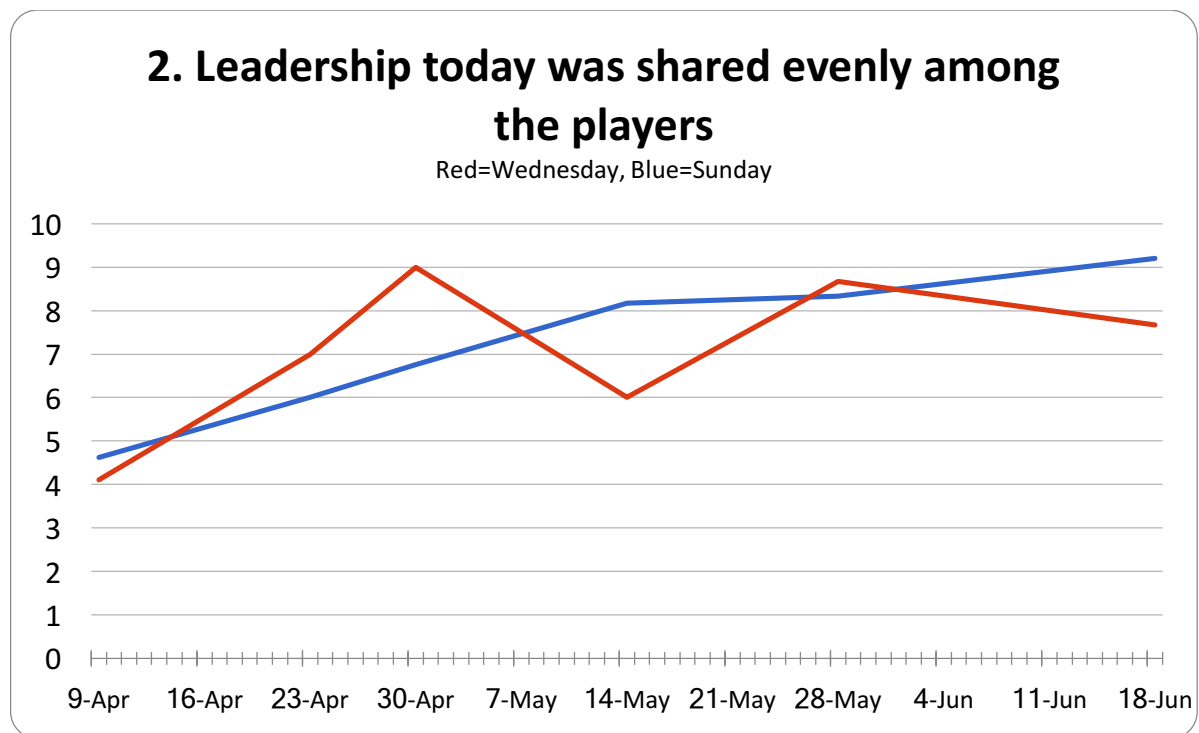


Figure 9

Here we see that the Sunday group was on an upward trajectory throughout the workshop period with regards to the attitude that the group began to share leadership evenly. The Wednesday group was a bit more sporadic. On May 2, if we look back at our Leadership by Participant graph (fig. 7), we see that leadership was fairly evenly distributed on this date. On this day, I missed the workshop due to a family conflict; so, due to these results, I decided that I would drop out of participating the last few workshops so that I could see the effect of my absence.

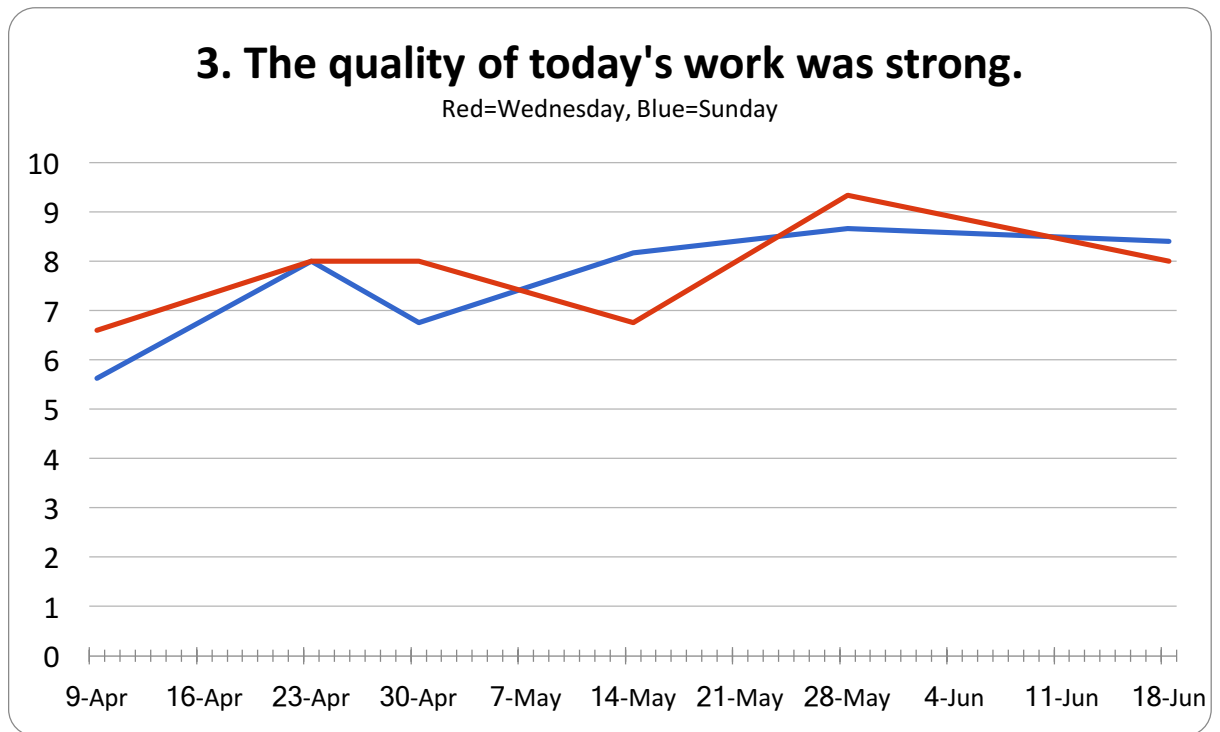


Figure 10

Here we see a general agreement from both groups that the quality of the work increased over time. The slight downturn at the end may also be attributed to having two new players in the last workshop of each group.

4. Today I felt a stronger connection to my fellow workshop participants than during the last workshop?

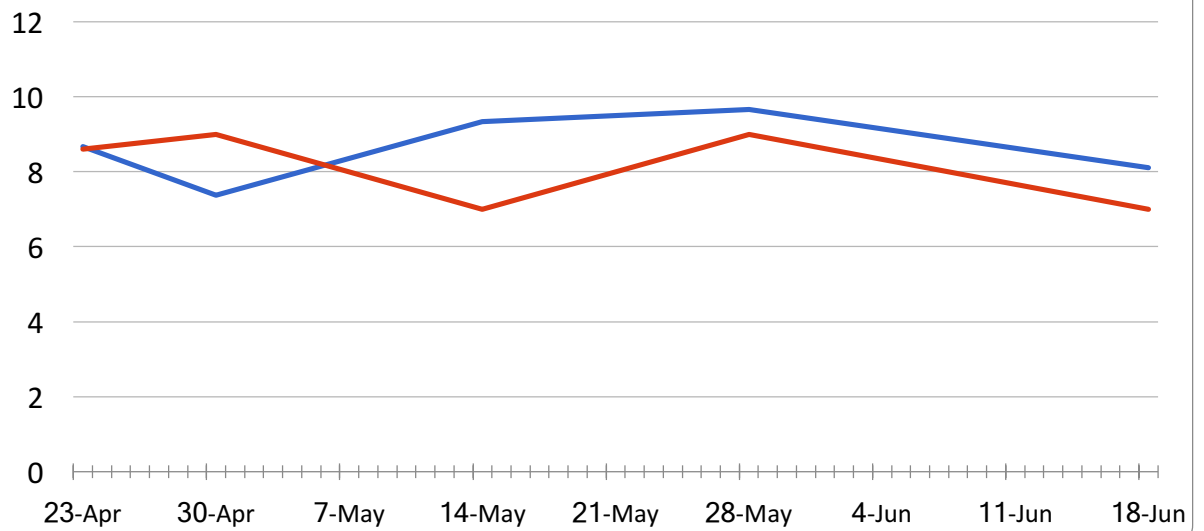


Figure 11

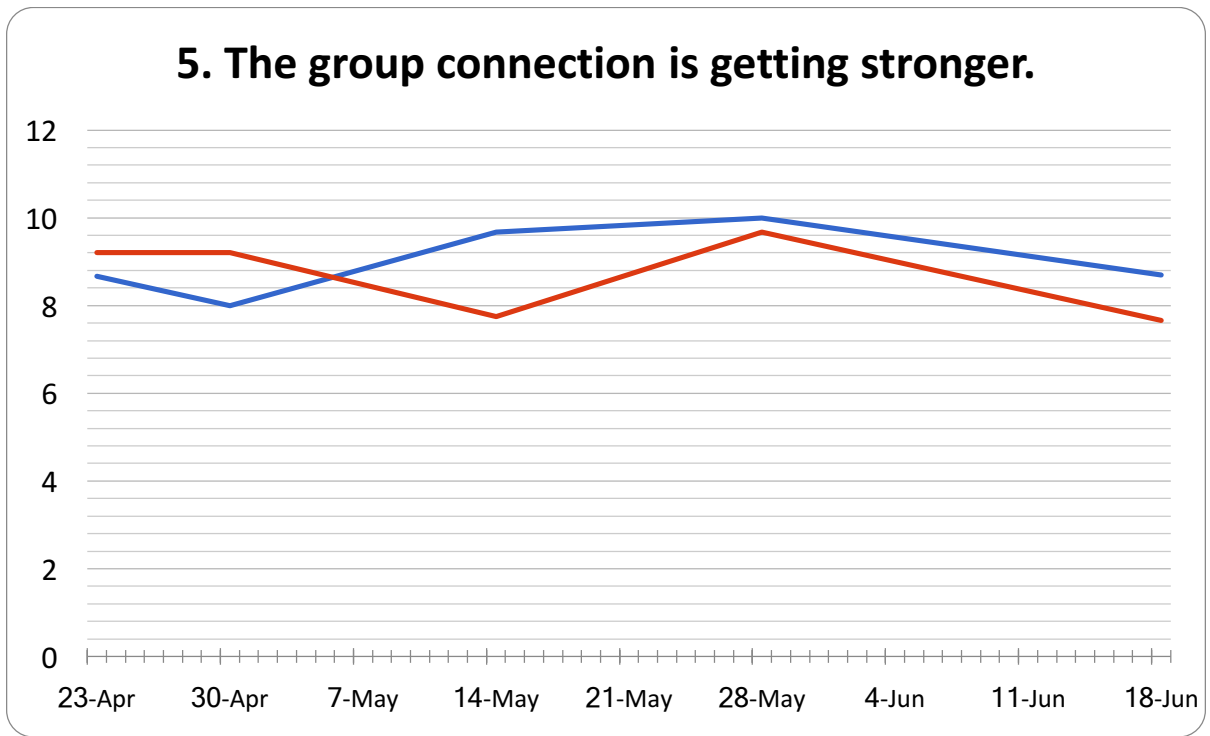


Figure 12

For question 4 and 5, it seems likely that they are questions that are similar and have a similar outcome. In both graphs, the numbers stayed fairly consistent throughout the workshop process. Both groups felt that statement 5 was highly true (as all data points are a 7 or higher), and statement 6 shows much enthusiasm; however, again, I feel that the final two workshops (introducing new members into the group) that the group connection felt slightly less.

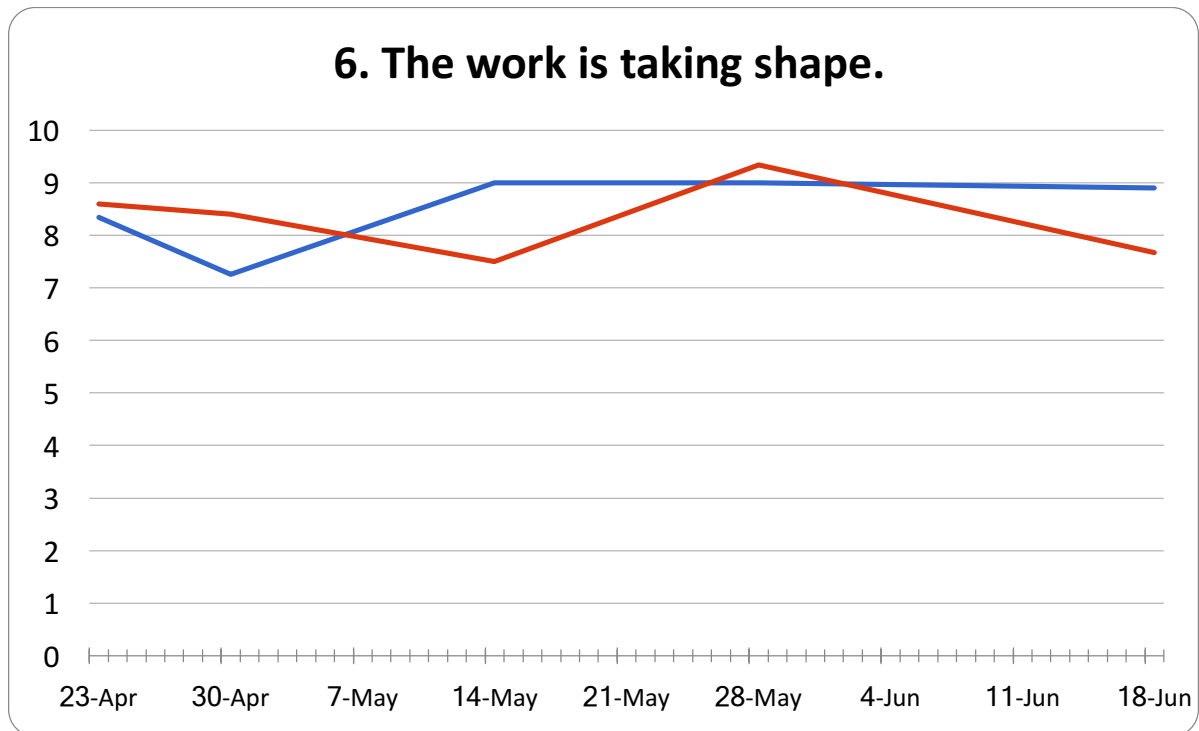


Figure 13

Finally, both groups were proud of the work put in to the workshops and got much out of it in regards to the work on group dynamics, leadership, and long-form improvisation. The attitudes of the players suggest that they were connecting on a level not seen in the initial workshop meetings. Overall, the survey data regarding the viewpoints of the performers showed that both groups felt that the work led to stronger human connections, an ability to work as an egalitarian ensemble, and pride in the work. Over the weeks of workshops, the group attitude showed that the group bond got stronger, they felt more confident working as a leaderless group, and felt the work of the ensemble was growing; however, it seems that the group attitude seemed to level out by the end of May. The final three questions were created to attempt to gather information as it related to past workshops (to gauge the group attitude to each question as it related to the last workshop). The data on all three questions showed that the group didn't feel the growth was strong

after the end of May. The first three questions were intended to capture the groups attitude for the workshop conducted on that specific day. The Sunday group saw a steady increase in attitude that the group was sharing its leadership, but, the questions of “quality of the work” and “strong connection” among the players evened out. The Wednesday group measured a slight decrease in all areas on these final three questions.

7. Conclusions & Future Research

Conclusion

Through an 8-week training in long-form improvisation with two different working groups, I have found that it is possible to create a strong group connection among the players. In the act of creating a long-form improvised scene, the practice of using agreement and supporting your scene partner led to intense listening and a cognitive connection which, over time, empowered strong bonds with each group. With a strong group bond, each group gained mutual trust and respect which then allowed a shared leadership to emerge.

Over the study period, leadership decentralized as the count of direct leadership statements from the project leader diminished and the study participants began to take leadership roles. In the beginning of the workshop, there were many leadership statements centralized within the workshop creator; then, by the last weeks of the workshop, leadership had become more evenly distributed among the players. In addition to decentralized leadership, there were less total leadership statements among the players; culminating in the final two workshops (July 14 and 18) where the participants each presented fewer than four leadership statements per person. By the end of the workshop, we saw the group become a “Shared Leadership” collectivist model of leadership.

In this project, the work that has evolved from the teachings of Viola Spolin, with the basic building block of “Yes &” and “agreement without judgement” in building improvised scenes, created a working environment where the players felt supported, listened to, and encouraged. The positive reinforcement that naturally occurs in an improv scene creates a fertile landscape for performers to strengthen their group bond.

In long-form improvisation, scene-work becomes a chain of agreement. One player initiates the scene then his/her scene partner accepts whatever is given, without judgement. With each passing exchange, confidence is lifted and each person in the scene proves they are listening and being listened to. As the scene progresses this listening is obvious as particles of previous scenes now become a theme or setting for a new scene. Each scene builds on the last, and, as is evident on June 14th, we see the final scene of the long form improv session reference the first scene; a scene that took place 53 minutes before. We see the intense listening that is a product of long-form improvisational training.

As the workshops progressed over the eight week term, we saw positive reinforcement and the pattern of constant agreement without judgement built support and confidence among the players. As agreement built the platform from which to work, intense active empathic listening played a role in allowing participants to gain trust and respect from fellow players, and by empathizing with each player in a scene, we saw a strong bond begin to form.

We also see in this study that the improvisers in the study created a cognitive convergence by creating settings, scene props, times of day, temperature, etc. all from joining together to build this imagined reality for an audience. Through Newell’s roadmap, we saw improvisers “input, elaborate, propose, select, and execute” ideas that helped build

texture and context for each scene. This cognitive convergence is a product of mirroring action, empathic listening and agreement.

Through this workshop, we saw a group of individuals bond as a group, remove leadership hierarchy, and, through their own perception and observable documentation, we saw each of the two workshop groups build a stronger group relationship through long-form improvisational training. As a result, workshop participants from each group greet each other with compassion and empathy with each engagement, even before and after the workshop sessions. I find it rewarding to see the bonds among the two workshop groups strengthen, and, when members of each group meet members of the other research group (although they have not been working directly with each other) find a common connection when discussing the work.

In addition, I witnessed that when two groups are given similar training, having had a similar experience, members of one group can easily integrate into the other working group. The skills are transferrable. The principal members of one group easily accept the member of the other group, and with that acceptance, group bonds with the new members form very quickly; however, there is still a stronger bond within the original group.

In this project, warm-up games and “Yes &” scene building techniques created positive reinforcement so the group could begin to trust and connect. Through long-form improvisational scenes, the group had to “deep listen” and affirm the other players listening. Each scene required improvisers to imagine surroundings, costumes, and props, therefore players relied on a Shared Mental Model of cognition. Through long-form improvisation, leadership in the group became egalitarian and the group’s attitude towards group cohesion became strong. This project proves that long-form improvisation techniques can help build a strong group bond and decentralize leadership.

Throughout the eight-week workshop program, the participants became much more friendly with each other. In both research groups, we see a workshop space that began with quiet rooms in the first few workshops, to active, energetic discussions happening before each workshop after the third workshop week. Groups were connecting on a personal level, and through the bonding process of creating improvised scenes, they felt more confident and supported; therefore, they felt more at ease to discuss personal matters before and after the sessions.

Participants came into the study with varying degrees of performance and/or experience with improvisation. At the conclusion of the study, each group member felt they were listening more deeply as a result of long-form improvisation, they worked with fewer leadership statements and statements were spread more evenly among the players than at the start of the project. The group believed they built a strong bond over the course of the workshops, and the amount of previous theatre training showed to have little or no effect on how the workshop effected each participant.

This project has shown the multiple benefits of long-form scene building techniques. As a college theatre professor, using long-form scene building in the classroom will aid me in building empathic listeners who support each other through positive reinforcement and help create a group bond that will help diversify the leadership in class. As an ensemble theatre practitioner, one of my main goals is to build trust and respect among the ensemble members and to create a positive environment for the creation of artwork. This project shows that long-form improvisation techniques help build an empathic, trustful environment where participants feel supported and heard; thus creating shared leadership groups with strong bonds. Using long-form improvisation scene building techniques both professionally

and academically, will help create stronger group connections and build positive working environments.

Further Research

I feel there are multiple avenues for further research into group dynamics and long-form improvisational training. In this particular study, there would have been a benefit to having the AELS study before the workshop began so that I could measure and track participants empathic listening from the first meeting as I tracked the feelings of group bond and leadership. An entire future project could be dedicated to the question of “does long-form improvisation training increase Active Empathic Listening?” This training, or certain elements of it, may very well increase empathic listening, and if this proves true, this training could be used in areas outside of theatrical performance to increase listening skills.

Further research using this workshop, I think, would yield interesting results when studying the concepts of Shared Mental Models and measuring group efficacy. As there is strong evidence that this work builds confidence, it would seem that measuring group confidence in relation to group efficacy would be a logical research subject. Does long-form improvisational training help build strong group confidence? Perhaps this work could be used to increase confidence in working groups outside of the performer milieu.

Through my research there are certainly moments where leadership is driven with non-verbal cues. In improvisation, one technique when entering a scene is to merely mirror what the other participant is doing, so that the scene may join efficiently and effectively (which is, in a way, an “agreement” that is non-verbal). Both quantitative and qualitative research could be done by analyzing non-verbal cues and mirroring in long-form improvisation workshops.

It would be beneficial to conduct this workshop with non-performers to measure group connection, leadership, and/or the ability to become better empathic listeners. Could long-form improvisation methods help increase empathy? It would also be interesting to study the effect of each person's personal story on the group. The Sunday group made it a regular feature to tell personal stories about their lives to use as inspiration; whereas, the Wednesday group did not. Did the regular use of personal stories help build a stronger more connected group? Did it build a stronger sense of empathy? It would also be beneficial to study the use of this workshop pedagogy as a component of the rehearsal process for a group producing a published play or devising ensemble.

There are theories and studies done on entrainment among performers (Eskenazi, et al. 2012; Bachrach, et al. 2015; Blakeslee, 2006). Entrainment is the concept that bodies actually begin to sync, physically, through heart rate, breath, and body temperature due to beats in music, dance, and, perhaps action in theatre. There was an attempt, in this workshop, to measure pulmonary rates of the participants during the workshops through wrist-worn fitness devices, however, the devices were not capturing heart rate at small enough intervals to be able to adequately graph participants heart rate; therefore, it was not possible to track. I feel it would warrant further study to have respiratory, body temperature, and pulmonary data taken from each participant during the workshop period to see if there is physiological syncing among the players during long-form improvisations. Might there be an empathic raise in heart rate, temperature, or breath even when a participant is watching a scene in front of them?

This project showed that long-form improvisational training built a strong group connection among the players in the process of creating scenes. This study showed that through the positive reinforcement that is inherent in the "Yes &" training, performers

improved listening skills and grew from a group of unconnected individuals into an egalitarian ensemble. Through this work, the group gained trust, confidence, respect, and empathy. Perhaps long-form improvisation skills found in this project would be useful in building other theatre performance ensembles, devising theatre ensembles, or to build a strong group of performers as a precursor to the regular rehearsal process for published play. Long-form improvisation builds a strong connection in performance groups; perhaps using this training in other working groups can build a strong connection among its members and achieve that elusive “it” (4) that John Britton was seeking in *Encountering Ensemble: The Group Mind*.

Appendices

- I. Participants**
- II. Participant Daily Survey**
- III. Participant Daily Survey Data**
- IV. Active Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)**
- V. AELS Participant Data**
- VI. AELS Baseline Data**
- VII. Leadership Statement Data**
- VIII. Workshop Videos (link)**
- IX. Edited Workshop Video DVD (attached)**
- X. Workshop Videos on Memory Stick (attached)**

I. Participants

Sunday Group Roster

Julie: Actor, Director, Educator, little improv experience

Donna: Nurse, non-performer, no improv experience

Emilie: Educator, good deal of improvisation experience

IO: Hair & Make-up specialist, actor, good deal of improvisation experience

Matt: Actor, improviser, attended only one workshop

Joe: Actor, little improv experience, only attended one workshop

Wednesday Group Roster

Sheila: Actor, little improv experience

Madi: Student, little improv experience

Jeanine: Actor, singer, little improvisation experience

Richard: Former theatre student, decent improv experience

Gabe: Student, some performance experience, some improvisation

Noelle: Student, some improv, only attended once

Todd: Actor, no improvisation experience, only attended once.

II. Participant Daily Survey

Devising through Improvising

Exploring long-form improvisation techniques to devise theatre with a shared-leadership ensemble.

Daily Workshop Survey

Date: _____

1. In today's workshop, there was a strong connection among the players.

False

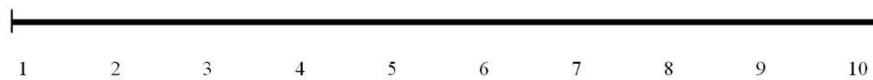
True



2. Leadership today was shared evenly among the players

False

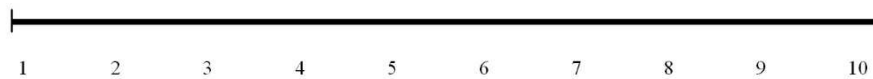
True



3. The Quality of today's work was strong.

False

True

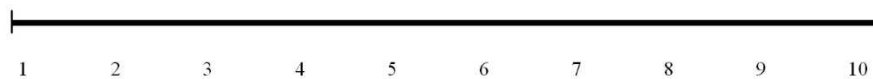


-----After first session-----

4. Today I felt a stronger connection to my fellow workshop participants than during the last workshop?

False

True



5. The group connection is getting stronger.

False

True



6. The work is taking shape.

False

True



III. Participant Daily Survey Data

Devising Through Improvising															
Survey Spreadsheet													†	*	*
						+							+	+	+
	9-Apr	12-Apr	23-Apr	25-Apr	30-Apr	2-May	14-May	17-May	24-May	28-May	31-May	6/7	6/14	6/18	
Question															
1. In today's workshop, there was a strong connection among the players.	5	7	9	8	3	8	8	7	8	9	7	10	6	7	
	6	5	6	6	8	10	9	7	10	9	8	10	7	7	
	5	6.5	7	8	9	8	8.5	8	10	9	8	10	4	7	
	3	6		7	7	9		7				10	8	9	
		7		7		9						8	7	9	
													9		
Avg.	4.75	6.3	7.33	7.2	6.75	8.8	8.5	7.25	9.33	9.00	7.67	9.60	6.83	7.8	
2. Leadership today was shared evenly among the players	3.5	7	6	7	5	7	7	5	6	9	7	8	7	9	
	4	4	6	6	8	10	9	6	10	8	8	8	5	9	
	7	4.5	6	7	7	9	8.5	6	10	8	8	7	9	8	
	4	2		5	7	9		7				10	7	10	
		3		10		10						8	9	10	
													9		
Avg.	4.63	4.1	6	7	6.75	9.00	8.17	6.00	8.67	8.33	7.67	8.20	7.67	9.20	
3. The Quality of today's work was strong.	4.5	9	9	7	6	6	7	5	9	7	7	9	8	7	
	7	5	6	7	8	10	9	7	9	10	9	10	7	8	
	8	7	9	10	6	8	8.5	8	10	9	8	10	10	7	
	3	6		7	7	9		7				10	4	10	
		6		9		7						8	7	10	
													8		
Avg.	5.63	6.6	8	8	6.75	8.00	8.17	6.75	9.33	8.67	8.00	9.40	7.33	8.40	
4. Today I felt a stronger connection to my fellow workshop participants than during the last workshop?			9	8	6	9	10	6	9	10	6	10	8	7	
			7	8	9	10	9	6	8	9	7	10	6	6	
			10	8	7	9	9	9	10	10	8	10	10	7.5	
				9	7.5	9		7				10	4	10	
				10		8						9	7	10	
													10		
Avg.			8.67	8.6	7.38	9.00	9.33	7.00	9.00	9.67	7.00	9.80	7.50	8.10	
5. The group connection is getting stronger.			9	8	7	9	10	7	9	10	7	10	8	8	
			7	9	8	9	10	6	10	10	8	10	7	8	
			10	10	9.5	10	9	10	10	10	8	10	10	7.5	
				9	7.5	9		8				10	5	10	
				10		9						9	7	10	
													9		
Avg.			8.67	9.2	8	9.2	9.67	7.75	9.67	10.00	7.67	9.80	7.67	8.70	
6. The work is taking shape.			8	6	6	8	9	6	8	7	7	10	8	8	
			7	9	8	9	9	6	10	10	8	10	8	9	
			10	10	8	9	9	10	10	10	8	10	10	7.5	
				8	7	9		8				10	5	10	
				10		7						9	6	10	
													10		
Avg.			8.33	8.6	7.25	8.4	9	7.5	9.33	9	7.67	9.80	7.83	8.9	

- KEY
- Sunday
 - † Added Todd (new participant)
 - * Combined 2 players from other group to join
 - + Organizer (Tad) did not participate)

IV. Active Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)

The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)

Version: General, Self-Report

Please read each statement and indicate how frequently you perceive it is true about you using the following scale:

- 1 =Never or almost never true
- 2 =Usually not true
- 3 =Sometimes but infrequently true
- 4 =Occasionally true
- 5 =Often true
- 6 =Usually true
- 7 =Always or almost always true

Sensing

- I am sensitive to what others are not saying.
- I am aware of what others imply but do not say.
- I understand how others feel.
- I listen for more than just the spoken words.

Processing

- I assure others that I will remember what they say.
- I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.
- I keep track of points others make

Responding

- I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgements.
- I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.
- I ask questions that show my understanding of others' positions.
- I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).

Notes: Items should be randomized prior to administration. If used for research purposes please cite as follows:

Bodie, G. D. (2011). The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS): Conceptualization and evidence of validity with the interpersonal domain. *Communication Quarterly*, 59, 277-295.

V. AELS Participant Data

Active Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)															
	Wednesday, June 14, 2017							Sunday, June 18, 2017							
Sensing							Avg							Avg	
I am sensitive to what others are not saying	6	2	4	6	5	6	4.83		4	4	6	4	3	4.20	
I am aware of what others imply but do not say	6	4	6	7	5	6	5.67		5	5	6	5	4	5.00	
I understand how others feel	6	2	5	7	6	5	5.17		4	6	6	6	6	5.60	
I listen for more than just the spoken words.	7	4	7	7	5	6	6.00		6	6	6	7	4	5.80	
	Section Average						5.42		Section Average						5.15
Processing															
I assure others that I will remember what	6	6	4	5	3	5	4.83		7	2	6	5	5	5.00	
I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate	6	2	4	7	6	4	4.83		5		5	3	7	5.00	
I keep track of points others make	6	4	6	7	6	5	5.67		4	7	6	7	5	5.80	
	Section Average						5.11		Section Average						5.27
Responding															
I assure others that I am listening by using verbal	7	4	7	4	5	6	5.50		7	5	6	5	7	6.00	
I assure others that I am receptive to their	6	3	6	6	3	6	5.00		3	5	6	7	5	5.20	
I ask questions to show my understanding of	6	4	5	5	5	6	5.17		4	6	5	6	7	5.60	
I show others that I am listening by my body language.	7	7	7	5	5	5	6.00		7	7	7	6	7	6.80	
	Section Average						5.42		Section Average						5.9

VI. AELS Baseline Data

AELS Baseline Survey of board and ensemble members of Maryland Ensemble Theatre											
Sensing				Processing			Responding				
I am sensitive to what others are not saying.	I am aware of what others imply but do not say.	I understand how others feel.	I listen for more than just the spoken words.	I assure others that I will remember what they say.	I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.	I keep track of points others make.	I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgments.	I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.	I ask questions that show my understanding of others'™ positions.	I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).	
4	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	5	
5	6	7	7	5	4	5	7	6	5	7	
6	6	6	7	4	6	6	5	7	6	6	
6	6	5	6	6	5	7	6	6	5	6	
6	6	5	6	6	5	7	6	6	5	6	
5	2	3	3	3	5	5	3	3	4	5	
4	5	3	3	2	2	4	4	3	5	5	
7	7	7	7	2	4	5	7	7	5	5	
6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	6	5	6	
5	6	5	7	4	6	7	7	6	6	6	
6	6	4	7	1	1	3	7	1	2	6	
5	5	5	6	3	6	4	7	7	6	7	
6	5	7	5	4	6	4	7	6	6	7	
7	7	5	7	7	4	4	4	7	6	7	
6	5	6	6	4	3	4	4	5	4	6	
5	7	7	7	5	5	7	6	6	6	7	
5	5	5	5	5	3	5	6	5	5	6	
6	7	5	5	6	6	6	7	5	6	7	
4	4	5	4	1	5	5	5	4	5	5	
3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	
7	6	5	7	6	5	5	6	6	5	7	
Avg.	5.43	5.43	5.10	5.57	3.95	4.43	5.00	5.48	5.19	4.95	5.90

VII. Leadership Statement Data

Leadership Statements							
Sunday Workshops							
Total number of leadership statements per session							
April-17	April-17	April-17	May-17	May-17	June-17		
48	65	50	36	34	18		
Average leadership statements per participant							
April-17	April-17	April-17	May-17	May-17	June-17		
6.85	16	10	9	8.5	3.6		
Wednesday Workshops							
Total number of leadership statements per session							
April-17	April-17	May-17	May-17	May-17	May-17	June-17	June-17
59	65	61	34	27	20	32	20
Average leadership statements per participant							
April-17	April-17	May-17	May-17	May-17	May-17	June-17	June-17
9.83	10.83	10.17	6.8	6.75	5	6.4	2.85

VIII. Workshop Videos Link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4429810>

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