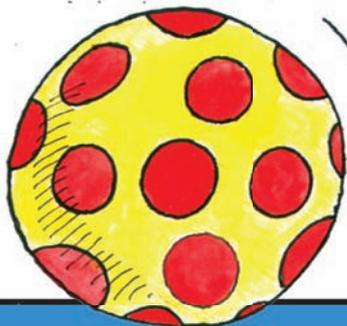
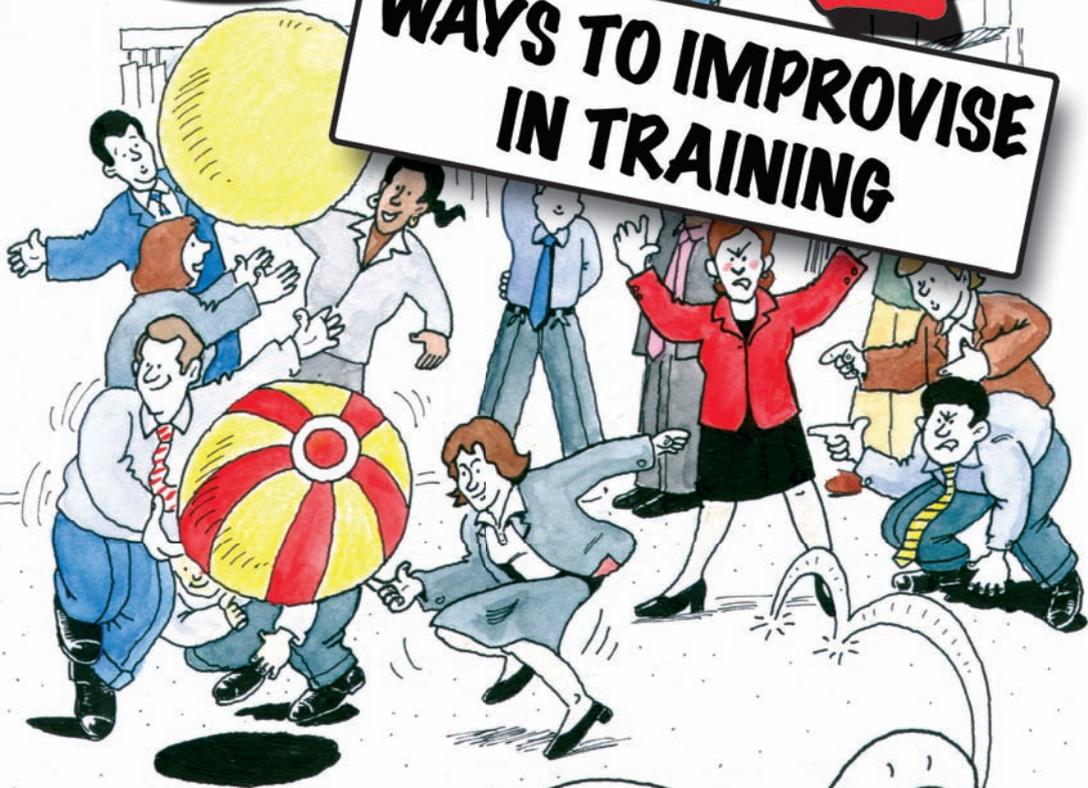


# 58 1/2

**WAYS TO IMPROVISE  
IN TRAINING**



**Paul Z  
Jackson**

# 58½

**WAYS TO IMPROVISE  
IN TRAINING**

*Improvisation Games and Activities for  
Workshops, Courses and Team Meetings*



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# *Introduction*

This book is for trainers, facilitators and anyone in need of a swift, energising activity. Each of the activities is improvisational in the sense that it generates what I call *impro energy*, a current that runs between participants. You recognise impro energy when you see people who are clearly “in the moment”, alert to whatever is going on in the here and now. It is generally characterised by laughter, prompted by people making things up off the cuff. At its best, impro energy results in *flow*, when the quality of the work is both high and seemingly effortless.

While the activities can be used simply as ice-breakers, they are all amenable to an injection of content. In other words, the facilitator can use them to lead to discussion of various topics – primarily indicated by our chapter titles – because, in doing the activity, the participant will have an experience of that subject.

The book is a companion to my *Impro Learning – How to Make Your Training Creative, Flexible and Spontaneous*, also published in paperback as *The Inspirational Trainer* (Kogan Page).

## *Where does this stuff come from?*

I have engaged in all of these processes with many different people, all of whom have inevitably contributed something. From those rare individuals who point-blank refused to have anything to do with them, I learned how to adapt instructions to make the challenges less daunting.

Such adaptations also catered for most of the “I have a broken leg/dodgy back/weak heart” brigade. Those who maintained they just didn’t feel like it often found themselves joining in when they saw how much the participants were enjoying themselves and gaining in relevant experience.

Humour in the trainer’s approach creates far more success than threat or excess challenge. It also goes well with an undefensive attitude. There need be nothing at stake if someone doesn’t want to play. I recommend, for example, an all-purpose opt-out clause. If there’s anything you don’t feel

like doing, you don't have to do it. We can dignify this further by suggesting that the role of observer may be valuable here.

Yet I invariably assume that everyone *will* take part, and present all the instructions with that expectation confidently in mind. Most of the value is in engaging in these processes. They teach improvisation from the inside. By observing, you'll learn only how to watch improvisation. Perhaps you'll pick up a few tips, too, but then you'll have missed your best chance to practise them.

### *What do they achieve?*

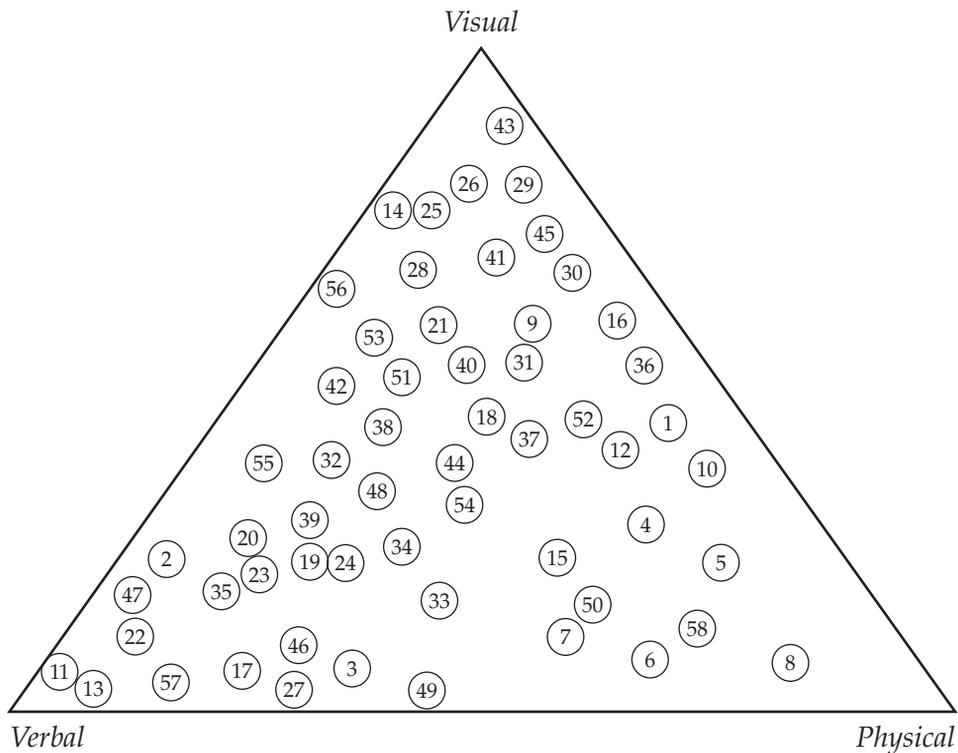
Responses show how the activities work on more than one level. A physical activity warms up limbs, and might also break down barriers between group members. A verbal activity might be an exercise in bonding as well as intellectual dexterity.

Many of the activities are processes in co-creation. Some build skills – often by increasing ways for participants to express themselves. Practitioners will benefit from enhanced creativity, greater flexibility and a boost to their confidence.

Then there is the metaphorical level, whereby the skilled trainer or facilitator never uses the activity merely to put a game into a programme as an ice-breaker or to add variety. The art is to link the activity to the subject of the seminar or workshop. It then serves as a metaphor or illustration of the content. The “Ping-Pong” activity, for example, can be positioned to show how a relaxed attitude to making mistakes often results in fewer errors.

You can uncover many of the metaphorical possibilities of the activities by looking at the questions in the “Debrief” sections. The questions are prompts for generating insights based on the immediate experience, which the facilitator can then link to similar or parallel experiences in the workplace. If you look at the Debrief questions in “A Big Cheese”, for example, you will see that they point you towards issues such as assertiveness and taking responsibility.

## *Visual, verbal and physical triangle*



Each activity is plotted between *visual*, *verbal* and *physical* triangulation points. This will help you choose an activity that has the right mixture of ingredients for example, “Shark Island” under “Alert and Energise” will be more physically demanding than most; “What You Should Have Said” under “Wisdom” is going to be primarily verbal; while “Silent Rooms” under “Scenarios” will balance the visual and physical.

Those in the middle of the triangle will feature a roughly equal balance between verbal, visual and physical elements – a mixture of activities with the variety of visual, verbal and physical involvement you want.

If you have a long talk session in a meeting, you might therefore choose an activity from the other dimensions to re-energise the participants.

## *Putting into your practice*

In running the activities during workshops, I sometimes find the explanation is more complicated than the activity. The faster we start to do it, the faster everyone understands. Here I've made the explanations and instructions as lucid as I can. You may still find that it takes a real running for some of the mechanisms to click into place. If anything remains unclear or if there are variants that you'd like to let me know about, please contact me by email at **paul@impro.org.uk** and I'll do my best to help.

## 12. Happiness Machines

Participants	Time	Energy Level	Individual	Team	Visual	Verbal	Physical
8 - 100	20 Minutes	**		*****	**	**	****

Small groups each create a series of machines in which the participants are all the working parts. Some groups spend their time discussing how they'll do it. Others simply work it out by doing it. The latter are usually more successful.



*Trainer says:*

"A machine requires that each part touch at least one other part at least some of the time. In your groups, you have five minutes to devise a sausage-making machine, which you'll present to the other groups."



*Bell*

"Each group takes a turn to present their machine.

"Now, in the same groups, make a machine that makes some kind of weather.

"And now a machine that makes happiness.

"Finally, a machine that builds itself and takes itself apart again: a self-build, self-destroy machine."



*Variations/developments*

Any sequence from physical product (sausage, hats, shoes) to less machine-likely products (sunshine, rain, tennis serve) to abstract product. Such

sequencing encourages increasing creativity and imagination, and stretches the group further into improvisational territory.



*Debrief*

- “Which machines that you have just seen did you admire the most, and why?”
- “What made those machines successful?”
- “What was the best balance between discussing it and trying it?”
- “Could you work together on this activity entirely without talking?”

## 41. Before/During/After

Participants	Time	Energy Level	Individual	Team	Visual	Verbal	Physical
6 - 60	40 Minutes	**	*	****	****	*	*

An improvisational activity that can be applied to almost any change situation. It's easy to do and often tremendously illuminating.



*Trainer says:*

"Each group is going to present a series of three tableaux to the others. The three tableaux are freeze-frames or stills, in turn representing the situation as it used to be, as it is now, and as you would like it to be in the future.

"The presentation is on stage, and you can use people as people or things, and you can portray people other than yourselves. We'll allow only the minimum of necessary explanation. The scene should as much as possible speak for itself.

"You have fifteen to twenty minutes to prepare your three tableaux. When you present, hold each position in turn for about thirty seconds, so we can take in all the details."



*Variations/developments*

Each character in the tableau is allowed to speak one line.

The past/present/future order can be varied.

Instead of "as you would like it to be in the future", for some sessions it may be preferable to say "as you expect it to be in the future".

For some situations, specify how far back in the past and how far forward in the future.



*Debrief*

- “What were the key messages from each of the groups you observed?”
- “Were those messages the ones you intended to convey?”
- “What has to happen for us to reach the image of the future that was presented?”

Whether you are running a training session, workshop or a team meeting, Paul Jackson's varied collection of games and activities will help you create an environment of active improvisation and experimentation, of imagination and energy, of laughter and commitment. What better way to engage everyone in the process of learning?

The games in this book can be used in a variety of ways. A physical activity warms up limbs and breaks down barriers between group members. A verbal activity is an exercise in creativity and intellectual dexterity. More than simply icebreakers, these activities are designed as vehicles for content. There are always links between the game and the subject of the workshop at a metaphorical level.

*58½ Ways to Improvise in Training* is a "hands on" book full of ideas to help trainers energise groups large and small. It's a book that will remain on my desk rather than propping it up!

**Leslie Spiers, Managing Director, Proem Consulting Limited**

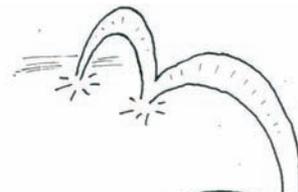
A clear, concise and easy-to-use book of activities to inspire and energise all your trainings. A motivational companion I recommend trainers take with them to all events.

**Curly Martin, International Coach, Trainer and Author, Achievement Specialists LLP**

This book describes many varied games and short burst activities to enliven any group of people. They could be used equally well in workshops, training events, or flagging meetings. The simple explanations will allow anyone to run the activity and I liked the fact that they were flexible enough to allow room to add your own little touches.

**Judy Stapleton, Training Manager, John Lewis**

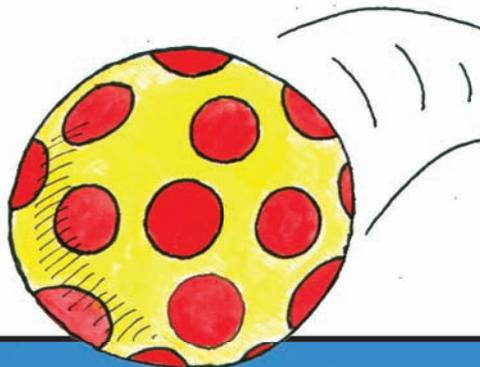
**Paul Z Jackson** is an independent training consultant with a wide spectrum of clients in both the private and public sectors. He has worked as a print journalist, senior producer for BBC Radio Four, lecturer at Bath Spa University College, and teacher at the London Actors Centre.



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