Introduction

The Upward Call

In a small city in the Netherlands, the tensions between police and Dutch-Moroccan youth had reached a crisis point. After a young man robbed a bus driver, officers and youth began clashing on the streets. One young person, Ilias, expressed his anger toward the cops for arresting him several times, beating him violently, and throwing him into some thorn trees. On the other hand, with so many kids standing on street corners engaging in suspicious behaviors or hurling insults, the police felt they were simply doing their jobs. Fueled by media stories about rising crime, the conflict spiraled out into the community when local restaurants began refusing service to the young people. Throughout the city, shouting, hatred, and distrust filled the air. Like so many places in the world, this had become a normal part of life.[1]

For close to a year facilitators tried to bring the two groups together. As part of the intervention, they asked the police and youth to play improvisational games with one another. With much skepticism and little interest in the process, the young people told one another it would be useless to engage with the police. One participant even said that for the first few meetings he wouldn't shake hands with anyone in law enforcement because of how violently he had been treated. From the opposite end, one officer shared how the idea of playing games with the young people originally sounded ridiculous to his squad.

But then something extraordinary happened. After engaging in these exercises, the officers and young people began to move beyond their rigid positions and see the humanity in one another. In one activity, the facilitators asked the police and youth to switch roles for a day, improvising what it might be like to step into the other's shoes. The young people

donned police uniforms and traveled through the city on bikes, while the cops acted out the youth standing on street corners and giving the officers a hard time. The shouting and anger turned into laughter and empathy. Both sides enjoyed the activity immensely, and the stage was set for real, solutions-focused conversations.

After these experiences, Marieke Borg, a police officer in the city, shared how she would now greet young men on the street, a previously unthinkable behavior. One young man related that "the two groups became one, and they understood each other better." Another officer shared, "I have been released of my negativity. The negative feeling I had toward these boys." In fact, the project's first year was so successful that the youth and police continued into a second. Jaap Norda, a researcher analyzing the intervention, noted how such "changes begin at a small scale. . . . an atomic reaction starts between two molecules, but the explosion has an enormous effect."[2]

Over twenty years ago, I went to see a live, professional improv comedy performance for the first time. I was stunned by how the performers worked with and trusted one another. They exhibited a level of play and joy seldom seen in everyday life, constantly built on one another's lines and actions rather than negating them, and overall, practiced fearless, seemingly superhuman communication skills. After, I decided to take an improv class, and I have never looked back. Little did I know that what basically started as a fun hobby would go on to have so much application to the rest of life. When I look back at what fields have most informed my thinking, improvisation remains at the core. Beyond its personal and professional benefits, however, the applications of improvisation hold the potential to transform our organizations and societies in ways previously unimagined. As the police and young people in the Netherlands discovered, improvising well matters.

As they also learned, the potential for change begins with us. Our lives mostly hang on the quality of what we say and how we interact with one another.[3] Day by day and moment by moment, we spend our lives affecting one another for better or worse in every encounter. Sometimes strong friendships dissolve from a lack of conversations. Different communication styles or statements interpreted in different ways can create unproductive tensions in the workplace where there were none. These stakes are only raised in our neighborhoods, communities, and nations, with racial and ethnic divisions arising from the ways that people talk about one another. Leaders have collapsed economies with their words, while politicians have traded insults that have brought us to the brink of world wars.[4]

In our increasingly partisan and polarized world, we need to find new ways to educate and train for democracy. Think about how people

often approach one another on just about any major political issue, from immigration to the climate crisis, and you'll mostly find monologues rather than dialogues, fixed talking points rather than open and honest inquiry, and entrenched tribal positions and group loyalties rather than listening and attempts to work across differences. As life increasingly goes online, it's also clear that the architectures of social media and other platforms frequently compound these problems by fueling social distrust, informational enclaves, and other forms of isolation and anxiety.[5] If there's one point that even many public leaders agree on, it's that "the partisan discord in our country followed very closely on the heels of schools stopping to teach civic education."[6]

Traditional notions of civic education and training will remain important but inadequate for addressing this challenge, however. The US Department of Education published a report arguing that narrow conceptions of civic education are not enough to tackle these problems, with a call to "expand education for democracy so it reaches all . . . in ever more challenging ways."[7] A host of educators and analysts have pointed out that "requiring students to take civics classes and relying on their volunteerism may be insufficient to prepare them for the life of active citizenship," so we "need to make a more systematic effort to create opportunities for teaching and learning democracy."[8] In essence, all of this "calls for a new movement to revive and reinvent civic education for the twenty-first century."[9] Such a movement would focus on training the high-level skills of bridging differences with others, learning to make important decisions in an engaged and collaborative manner, and ultimately creating the conditions for outstanding individual, organizational, and societal relationships—an education in the art and science of citizenship.

I found myself compelled to write this book in our current moment because there's no other way of educating and training for citizenship that I, and so many others, have found as powerful and liberating in people's lives. This project builds on many initiatives worldwide to reinvent civic education in new and surprising ways and, most importantly, converges with the best ideas and practices from across disciplines in doing so. I came to the point where keeping this story boxed up for much longer just wouldn't do: there's simply too much unrealized potential at stake for our educational systems, organizations, and societies writ large. It's a story that reminds me of how, as William Gibson once said, "the future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed."[10]

Before we begin this journey, a good starting point is to recognize how all of us face difficulties in our work with other people. To make this real, I want you to think for a moment about who you struggle with in your work.

Educators often struggle to motivate and connect with their students. Scientists can find it difficult to translate complex ideas to potential funders. Doctors with unfriendly bedside manners may find themselves on the receiving end of patients' tempers or lawsuits. Managers may hurt staff performance by providing infrequent or unhelpful feedback. Executive directors and CEOs can forget to collaborate with others up and down their chains of command. And, as the Netherlands case shows, police and young people may even fail to work with one another, creating problems for their communities that threaten to spiral out of control. These examples all raise the question of what kind of teaching and training could help us most in these types of moments. From our everyday interpersonal interactions to the highest echelons of business and policymaking, we desperately need the skills that can help citizens and societies function more productively on our increasingly interconnected planet.

How Can People Develop the Skills Our World Most Needs?

What kind of teaching and training can show us *how* to achieve so much more in our interactions with others? Not simply at an intellectual level, but with the full engagement of our bodies, minds, and spirits? I have long explored these questions in my professional work, joining others around the world committed to finding ways of improving human relationships at every level. To these efforts, this book contributes a unique, practical approach that builds upon a growing evidence base and global movement: that improv-based teaching and training methods—which originated in improvisational theater but have since been adapted and evolved in many other contexts—can bridge differences and promote the communication and leadership skills our world urgently needs.

For many readers, the idea that "improvisation" and "theater" should have anything to do with improving the world may at first seem strange. Yet it's important to remember that the best ideas sometimes emerge from the unlikeliest of places. Improvisational theater has traditionally involved performances by actors or comedians in short scenes or longer plays entirely made up "without scripts." Figures such as Tina Fey, Wayne Brady, Stephen Colbert, and many others have all come out of extensive backgrounds in improvisation, with television shows like *Whose Line Is It Anyway* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* popularizing the form. The tools and values of improv are no longer unique to the field of entertainment, however. Individuals and

groups in business, government, nonprofits, and other sectors have found that ideas from improv translate directly into professional settings as a way of quickly improving and leaving a lasting imprint for many skills.[11]

These claims aren't speculative. Emerging scholarly research is now replete with findings demonstrating that people who have undergone improvisation training "improved their confidence, effectiveness, ability to adapt, spontaneity and comfort in successfully handling unique situations."[12] With measured success, improvisation has been used to train scientists, medical and pharmacy staff, engineers, state officers, business students and faculty, service employees, managers, social workers, military personnel, and countless others.[13] Half of the world's top business schools now have a course on improvisation.[14] Fortune 500 companies have even embraced an improvisational model in their work, seeing firsthand that sales representatives have become more effective and empathetic with customers as a result, while CEOs of companies have undergone improv training for professional development.[15]

The organizational value of improvisation makes sense since, in study after study of the skills employers most value, several terms that improv training targets now top the competency lists for twenty-first-century workers: adaptability, enthusiasm, initiative, teamwork, resilience, leadership, and outstanding communication with diverse people.[16] With responses from 600 employers across 44 countries, the Graduate Management Admission Council's annual report finds that communication skills continue to be the most sought-after aptitude among new hires, with speaking and listening skills ranked on average "twice as important as managerial skills."[17] In a survey of 349 executives from across the world, 90 percent identified "organizational agility" as a key differentiator in our current environment,[18] and in recent research, 1,500 chief executives from 60 countries highlighted "creativity" as the most important skill for future leaders and organizations.[19]

These skills have become crucial because the world is changing faster than ever, so much so that "a person who gets locked into a set way of doing things finds it difficult or impossible to adjust."[20] In fact, one of the first experiments using improvisational practices to help citizens involved public services in a Canadian city, where fire department chiefs realized that they needed training to become more adaptive during unexpected moments: "they would be under pressure to drag a passenger from a crashed car, only to find that the door was not quite the same door that they had learned about in basic training."[21] The skill with which firefighters could work with surprises became a recognized competency and a counterweight to using unbending principles and strategies.

This type of need will only intensify, according to the American Association of Colleges and Universities' National Leadership Council, so innovative thinking will be an essential learning outcome for our globally connected futures.[22] From Daniel Goleman's groundbreaking work linking "emotional intelligence" with professional success to Richard Florida's argument that "the creative class" is a key to economic development,[23] organizations are increasingly placing value on finding people who can think and act imaginatively in solving problems.[24]

Applied Improvisation

Given improvisation's relevance to organizations, since the early 2000s a global network of practitioners and scholars have come together to formalize and name this movement: "applied improvisation."[25] Applied improvisation is "the use of principles, tools, practices, skills, and mindsets of improvisational theater in non-theatrical settings."[26] Among other outcomes, it seeks to improve peoples' abilities to listen, accept and support others, be flexible and mindful, take risks, innovate, and create positive professional cultures. Inspired by but different from improv for comedy entertainment, applied improvisation seeks to train "individuals or groups who seek personal development, better teamwork, and more thriving communities," with a focus on "directly impacting personal or organizational change."[27]

Contrary to the kinds of associations the term "improv" may bring up, applied improvisation isn't "winging it," but rather "a highly-refined system of observing, connecting and responding,"[28] with "the honed ability to put all your preparation into practice without getting tangled up by your plans."[29] It's about reacting, adapting, and communicating well, all actions that promote active listening.[30] Even key figures in improvisational theater argued that improv comedy was always meant to be founded first in "what is important about being human in a community," improving the ability of people to connect with one another, understand patterns in their lives, and more.[31]

These ideas have a long history. Many ancients argued that improvisation is a skill requiring training, and should be considered one of the most important subjects in an educational curriculum.[32] Given the weight of evidence for applied improv, I believe that every school should have a required course in the subject, while every community should prioritize this way of thinking and acting in its civic programming—and this book will show both why and how to implement these ideals in practice.

I have been a communication professor and consultant, a researcher of civic engagement and public discourse, and an improvisational performer in Los Angeles and New York City across the last two decades. In addition to running applied improvisation workshops all over the world, I teach improv for executive business and public administration students at the City University of New York and incorporate applied improv in my professional workshops and classes at Columbia University's School of Professional Studies and New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. In my teaching, improv has helped me drop my scripted lesson plans when necessary to meet the needs and interests of my students as they happen. I have also walked into rooms rife with conflict and seen those tensions dissolve within minutes of getting people up on their feet and trying out new, more positive ways of interacting with one another. In countless teams, applied improvisation has helped me listen better and shift more easily between the roles of leader or follower as the situation demands. In my role as an advisor to many organizations, it has also helped me observe where and how institutions could be more adaptive in their work.

I have never carried out any of these practices perfectly, of course, but with its emphasis on process, learning from and moving beyond mistakes, affirming and adapting to others, and embracing a playful attitude, applied improvisation has substantially aided my own and others' journeys toward these ends. In essence, I often feel that I've held on to a secret for too long: *that improv provides some of the best training for life that one can get.* It has helped me become more aware of when I'm failing to be present with other people during a conversation. It has even changed how I teach courses such as public speaking, reversing the typical classroom setup from lecturing to "side-coaching" students.[33] Most importantly, as this book will highlight each step of the way, applied improvisation has helped me understand how communication works and the role it can play in improving society at a more advanced level. Let's turn to these stakes for a moment.

Pulling Ourselves, Our Organizations, and Our Societies Upward

As our scientific and technological knowledge of the world continues to grow, human beings have failed to develop and spread sophisticated communication practices at the same level.[34] Imagine what would be missing from modern life if engineers had been unable to move beyond the most

simple of mathematical formulations. We wouldn't have refrigerators or airplanes, that's for sure. In the same way, think about what we miss by relying on only the most basic understandings and practices of communication. In a conflict with a friend, we may stick to only one narrow story about the problem, omitting many important details or options that could create a better future for us both. In a team meeting, we may get so hung up attributing the organization's problems to others' "personalities" that we fail to think at a higher level about the role that the meeting's very structure or organizational policies could be playing in these problems.[35] In the midst of an intense negotiation, we may get so busy trying to claim value for ourselves that we miss opportunities to create value for both parties.[36] Whether it's a lack of listening or longstanding personal habits, the complexities of communication show that it's anything but a "soft skill." No one achieves anything of consequence without the ability to create meaning and productively interact with others.

Barnett Pearce finds that these are urgent matters and that we're all in a race that we need to win. I founded my consultancy, Communication Upward, on Pearce's ideas that—while so much in the world has the potential to pull humanity *backward*, and though forces like technology can certainly pull us *forward*—what's really needed is better insight into what will take us *upward*. Pearce writes,

> The pull upward consists of new ideas, institutions and practices that elevate and enhance human beings and society. . . . But is the evolution of our ability to act wisely keeping pace with technological developments . . . or sufficient to overcome the downward pull of the old, familiar ways of being? . . . If we divided the past 4,000 years of human history into 200-year increments and plotted innovations in this "upward" direction, we'd rightly say that our era is experiencing a dizzyingly rapid rate of social development—very likely faster than advances in technology.[37]

All of this calls for new ways to improve our social skills. No one approach will ever provide a definitive answer for doing so, but this is a mission whose parts can sum to a greater whole—and applied improvisation provides one avenue for getting us further down this path.

Although evidence on improv's benefits for outcomes such as higher productivity, reduced stress, and improved customer service in business have

burgeoned in recent years, this book ultimately points readers toward a larger societal possibility: that *applied improvisational training can provide a foundational education in democratic practices*. We need more and better tools for building trustful relationships in a time of civic crisis. By many measures, including political polarization and the erosion of public discourse, many of us are living in a "diminished democracy" and a "democracy at risk."[38] What's needed are new forms of broadly defined civic engagement, "which include all activities aimed at enhancing the quality of life in a community, not just those designed to address social problems."[39] In other words, "Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes."[40] These definitions of civic engagement highlight a need to think more widely about the practices that put citizens in contact with one another. Not just surface-level interactions, but interactions that manifest the best of free and collaborative exchanges that take into account one's own and others' needs. If the most central resource for any community is "speaking relationships, among neighbors and acquaintances in addition to friends,"[41] then a commitment to new methods for improving that capacity becomes critical to the civic challenges of our time.

From another perspective, many studies bear out that citizens across the planet now have increased expectations for transparency, co-created services, post-bureaucratic flexibility, trust, and robust communication with public organizations,[42] underscoring the need for more improvisational approaches within such institutions. The advance of many forms of divisive, post-truth populism around the planet has also led scholars to bemoan the decline of a "communication commons—a public space characterized by diversity, tolerance, reason, and facts."[43] Citizens need to build "civic muscle," or the strengthening of "people's capacities to shape the world around them,"[44] yet spaces where citizens can meet and grow their civic selves through positive interactions with others appear to be declining almost universally. In essence, our current political environment implores the development of depolarizing people and organizations.

Addressing these concerns, I move previous conversations and connections about improv into the civic realm, especially in forwarding the value of improvisation for education, governments, nonprofits, healthcare, and other organizations working in the public interest. Challenging existing patterns of thought and behavior, this book will show how different our

world could look if improvisational teaching and training methods were part of every educational system, professional development program, and community.

Like the police and youth in the Netherlands, with more diverse people and cultures coming into contact than ever before in human history, we need new skills, habits, and ways of thinking.[45] Consistent with civic engagement research, we need to counteract "the narrative of citizens as combatants with preformed and inflexible preferences" as "incompatible with the still-robust democratic faith in a citizen body concerned with the common good and for a political life that display[s] the virtues of civic friendship and social solidarity."[46] Working with some of the best ideas in the communication field, improv-based methods can promote communication excellence among people. Aligned with decades of leadership studies and current trends toward building distributed and adaptive leadership in organizations, improv training can help individuals translate theory into practice, putting a range of supported ideas about democratic leadership within anyone's reach. For our civic capacities, improv training shows us what communal and political engagement can look like at a societal level. From each of these angles, applied improvisation can build democratic commitments by bridging differences and fostering connections. Following Meira Levinson's lead, this project therefore moves from a focus on "education *within* democracy" to "education *for* democracy."[47]

What You Can Do with This Book

This book offers a novel, unconventional way of teaching and training the hard skills of bridging differences, building connections, and improving communities from the ground up. It's primarily for anyone whose work involves civic education or community engagement, including educators of all kinds, advocates for civil discourse, those involved in conflict management and resolution, diplomacy, and negotiation or mediation; training and development specialists; administrators looking to build new curricula or programming; and professional organizations seeking to embed productive, sustainable, and socially responsible forms of interaction in their teams and organizations. At its core, improv for democracy provides a complete framework of field-tested and evidence-based lessons and practices for accomplishing these goals.

In the course of giving presentations and workshops on this subject around the world, I've also discovered secondary audiences who will use

this book in other ways. I've met communication and leadership experts who have begun using some of these ideas and practices in their training and consulting interventions. I've met managers trying to find ways to get their technically brilliant teams to become more adaptable to the challenges of dealing with actual human beings. I've met social workers and family therapists who have started using many of the lessons outlined in this book in their sessions with clients, especially in promoting dialogues that accomplish significant work without the somber spirit that these methods sometimes require. I've met teachers and professors seeking to ditch their PowerPoints and teach the same content with more interactive techniques, given research on the need for "democratic classrooms" or the effectiveness of a broader range of performative, affective, and cognitive learning methods for just about any subject.[48] Many people I've met are simply interested in the value of improv as a methodology, form of pedagogy, or way of living. In essence, I never cease to be amazed at how improv-based teachings and practices continue to be taken up and adapted for new contexts.[49]

This book should become a core resource for such individuals and groups, adding a powerful new philosophy (and the many schools of thought that support it) and a hands-on toolkit of exercises to their educational repertoires. Whether your goal is to create an improvisation course as part of your school or other curriculum, to experiment with applied improv exercises in existing teachings and trainings in areas from communication to management, or simply to start using the lessons within in your personal life, this book will show you how. Many ideas about applied improvisation have emerged from different places,[50] but the research findings, interdisciplinary connections, and applications of learning in this way have yet to be threaded together in a systematic manner. Having worked with groups from many different countries, and since applied improvisation is a global network, I also stay attentive to how this work can be applied internationally.

While this text provides an analytic framework for applied improvisation, it also covers specific exercises, games, and thought experiments that trainers, instructors, and others can use to help participants become more creative, heighten awareness, think faster, stretch behavioral flexibility, build confidence, improve expression and governance skills, and, above all, think and act more democratically. While I've worked with many of these exercises hundreds of times, I made sure that each has been field-tested in my teachings and trainings with different audiences.

Data for this project were gathered from nearly two decades of notes I have taken as a participant-observer, former student, and performer at many major improv theaters across the US, as well as thousands of articles, books,

and multimedia artifacts on improvisational theater and applied improvisa-tion.[51] I translate concepts from improv theater that are applicable to our public lives (e.g., an insight into how each of us is always shifting between a low, medium, or high "status" in different situations), while leaving behind anything that's irrelevant to that purpose (e.g., tips on how to make a scene or character funnier, which is a goal for improv for comedy entertainment). Since it's an area where practitioners have generally been ahead of scholars, I fill this theory gap by paying attention to interdisciplinary scholarship that supports this work, including communication research on interpersonal and public engagement, educational and leadership research, and more. I also apply lessons from my own experiences teaching applied improvisation in undergraduate, graduate, and executive courses and workshops around the world.

Toward Communication, Leadership, and Civic Excellence

Chapter 1 of this book will provide a framework for developing an improv-for-democracy curriculum, highlighting connections with leading ideas and empirical research supporting its methodology and approach. Chapter 2 will guide readers through how to prepare for and implement applied improvisation, some core ideas about improv that provide a foundation for more advanced applications in the rest of this book, and a sequence of exercises that demonstrate how this can all be structured for best effect. Chapter 3 will focus exclusively on the democratic communication lessons that can be drawn from applied improvisation, with supporting examples and applications. From a larger perspective, chapter 4 dives into connections between applied improv and democratic organizational leadership. Some work highlights how improvisation accounts for 75 to 90 percent of leadership decision making, but "no other leadership skillset that is applied [at least] two-thirds of the time has ever been so underdeveloped."[52] Institutions across the private and public sectors have also increasingly called for ways to train for "interpersonal organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) that is affiliative, co-operative, and directed at other individuals."[53] This chapter addresses these gaps by working with current conceptions of leadership that focus on adaptation and interactivity in the context of contemporary organizational life, including exercises that can be used toward this end.

Chapter 5 moves to an even higher level, considering the applications that applied improvisation brings to the training of civic skills, ideas for how

this work could play out across societies in the future, and accompanying training methods. While drawing useful distinctions between communication, leadership, and civic skills—or individual, organizational, and societal competencies—I position all three of these levels of intervention in terms of their contributions to the building of vibrant democracies. An ability to work responsively with others is as much a concern for individuals in face-to-face conversation as it is for government agencies delivering programs to populations in need. Ultimately, in practice, these three areas blend together, with each informing the other. Applying this perspective, the concluding chapter will focus on the overall contributions of this project and what's next for this emerging movement.

Before diving into the following chapter, it's worth underscoring the core point that runs through this book: whoever you are, if you start using applied improvisation as one way of teaching and training, you are doing the work of democracy. A lot has been written about *what* democracies should look like. Far less has covered *how* to actually train citizens in democratic perspectives and skills. Some exceptions exist, such as the burgeoning fields of dialogue, deliberation, and debate, which are creating new ways to train citizens in how to listen, learn, and become more engaged with their communities.

Unlike many ways of building bridges between diverse citizens, however, applied improvisation advances democratic skills in a playful register. It builds on a deep spring of ancient and contemporary thought about the centrality of meaningful, "serious play" in the public sphere, especially "the ability to play with ideas in such a way that cultivation of those ideas and communicative growth with others in public contexts can occur."[54] In a telling moment, former US Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor shared during a hearing how she felt about the traditional civics classes she had taken in her early education: "I well remember having a lot of civics classes, and I got pretty sick and tired of it, to tell you the truth. I thought it was miserable." Looking to build a platform in which young people could feel the excitement of educating and training in democracy, she started iCivics, a curriculum that teaches civics through games.[55]

Following O'Connor's lead, by aiming for societal improvement this project builds on key works such as Joshua Lerner's *Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics*. Lerner details how "for most people, democratic participation is relatively unappealing. It is boring, painful, and pointless. . . . The demand is there, but attractive democratic processes are in short supply."[56] He makes a compelling case that

one way to make public participation more engaging is to learn from an area that people everywhere already volunteer countless hours to: games.[57] From Argentine cities where game design has influenced public policy strategies to Canadian housing projects and assemblies designed like game shows, such experiments in democratic work are moving beyond the status quo.[58] The civic potential for games has also been recognized more broadly, building on the "gamification" movement that is increasingly showing how, for instance, turning regular workplace tasks into game-like activities provides people with the increased motivation and incentives lacking in many organizations.[59]

This project further advances works such as Augusto Boal's *Legislative Theater: Using Performance to Make Politics*. Boal's use of theater-based interventions to turn community concerns into public policies in Brazil remains legendary. As Boal puts it, "in the Legislative Theatre the aim is to bring the theatre back to the heart of the city, to produce not catharsis but dynamisation" by moving beyond traditional methods for transforming each citizen's "desire into law."[60] Many organizations focused on improving public participation continue to ask, "What does it take to make democracy work as it should?"[61] Like these projects, improv education demonstrates that play and games can be a more consequential matter for people's civic lives than has often been recognized.

Indeed, this book builds on current work underscoring the significance of play and performance to human and community development. Human development is active, emergent, social, dialectical, generative, flexible, and always in the process of both being and becoming in created environments that hold the potential to either grow or impede these forces.[62] In this spirit, growth "is the activity of creating who you are by performing who you are not. It is an ensemble—not a solo—performance," centered on the goal of "creating new forms and performances of life."[63] This perspective on development seeks to create maximalist rather than minimalist social and political practices, emphasizing what it means to be a fully public, community-oriented being, moving beyond the reductions of civic life only to voting or holding a few, individualistic political positions that one brings up occasionally within circles of influence.

Along these lines, in an exciting development, applied improvisers have been getting together to raise the stakes for this work on behalf of "humanity." Working with organizations such as the Red Cross and disaster relief workers, they have shown how an improvisational philosophy and techniques can address how people respond to some of the most vexing problems the planet currently faces.[64] After Typhoon Haiyan, groups all around the

Philippines participated in applied improv workshops that "enabled them to feel what it was like, and to practice their responses, to unpredictable situations." The participants rated the experience positively, feeling more ready to handle these situations and act on disaster preparedness principles.[65] Similarly, given how little impact traditional forms of training have had during unimaginable moments of crisis (such as 9/11 or the COVID-19 global pandemic), with its emphases on confident, connected leadership and communication, improv is now being used as an effective means of training government personnel for high-stakes emergencies.[66]

Moreover, the United States Embassy in Cyprus has hired improv teachers to do greater societal work on its behalf. Instructors ran extensive improvisational sessions as "part of the Embassy's ongoing effort to facilitate reunification of the island by fostering dialogue between people with shared interests and goals," with a particular interest in promoting "lessons in agreement to the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, helping them raise the borders and live as one people."[67] In another application, improv was applied with particle physicists at CERN's Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland "to help a disparate group of physicists from all over the world work together . . . [and] avoid disaster."[68] Other scientists are also now deep into research on how improv can create inclusive environments.[69]

These developments show that a next step is to establish higher purposes and practices for applied improvisation, applying a "civic frame" to this work.[70] This book works parallel to these efforts, setting out a challenge to embed and scale applied improvisation as a philosophy and set of concrete lessons and trainings that can affect the level of societies.[71] From the ground up, applied improvisers are looking to change the way human beings relate to one another in every community. For the public good, let's call it "Improv for Democracy."