



Performing Bridges

A Practical Toolkit for Improvisation in Adult Education



Photo: Jana Mirina

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Introduction

Across Europe, millions of adults face barriers that traditional education was simply not designed to address. Migrants navigating an unfamiliar language, refugees carrying the weight of displacement, adults with low confidence who have been failed by formal schooling. These are the people most in need of learning, and most likely to be left out of it. The barriers they face are not just practical. They are emotional, cultural, and relational: fear of judgment, cultural distance, a sense that the classroom is not a place for people like them (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).



At the same time, educators working with these groups often find themselves under-equipped. Many powerful teaching methods rely on shared language, prior academic confidence, or a willingness to engage that vulnerable learners may not yet have. What is needed are flexible, low-threshold approaches. This toolkit is a response to that need.

Performing Bridges: Improvisation for Inclusive Education and Social Change is a transnational Erasmus+ partnership bringing together organisations from Portugal, Latvia, and the Netherlands. Its goal is to make improvisational arts a practical, accessible tool for educators, youth workers, and cultural professionals working in adult education, particularly with socially vulnerable groups.

The project has three core ambitions:

1. **Train educators:** equipping at least 100 professionals with hands-on skills to use improvisation for social and emotional learning, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving.
2. **Build shared resources:** developing this toolkit and an online platform to ensure long-term access to methods, exercises, and a community of practice.
3. **Foster inclusion:** creating learning environments where migrants, refugees, and adults with fewer opportunities can participate fully, express themselves freely, and develop the confidence and civic skills to engage in their communities.

Why Improvisation?

Improvisation might seem like an unusual choice for serious educational work. In fact, it is one of the most research-supported tools for the contexts where traditional methods struggle. At its core, improvisation is **embodied, participatory, and relational**. It does not require fluency in a shared language. It does not reward prior knowledge or academic skill. It asks only that participants show up, pay attention to each other, and act. And it turns a simple invitation into a powerful learning experience (Spolin, 1963; Johnstone, 1979).

Research consistently shows that improvisation-based practice produces meaningful outcomes for adult learners:

- **Creativity and divergent thinking:** improvisation has been shown to promote divergent thinking, tolerance for uncertainty, and affective well-being (Felsman et al., 2020).
- **Psychological wellbeing:** participants in improvisation programmes report reduced anxiety, greater emotional flexibility, and improved social confidence (Ritter & Mostert, 2022).
- **Communication and social flexibility:** improvisation trains active listening, responsiveness, and co-creation — the skills that enable people to participate in diverse communities (Kühner et al., 2024).
- **Intercultural connection:** arts-based methods have demonstrated particular value in supporting the social inclusion of refugees and migrants, creating spaces for genuine encounter and voice (Van Houte & Rast, 2024; Alves Moreira & Jakobi, 2021).

Crucially, improvisation works because it is grounded in **psychological safety** — the condition under which people are willing to take risks, make mistakes, and learn



(Edmondson, 2019). When a group establishes that no contribution is wrong, that everything is useful, it creates the conditions for the type of learning that vulnerable adults need: learning that builds confidence.

This is captured in the project's guiding motto:

No mistakes — everything is useful.

What This Toolkit Offers

This toolkit is a practical companion for educators who want to bring improvisation into their work — whether they have years of experience with creative methods or are picking up these ideas for the first time.

It is organised around four parts:

- **Part One** lays out the theoretical and practical case for improvisation in adult education, including the four core principles that guide all the exercises in this toolkit.
- **Part Two** provides a full library of exercises, organised by learning goal, from building safety and trust, to developing listening and dialogue, to supporting civic voice and self-expression.
- **Part Three** is a facilitation guide: practical guidance on how to run sessions, manage resistance, and reflect on your own practice.
- **Part Four** offers targeted adaptation notes for specific groups, including migrants and refugees, adults with low confidence, multilingual groups, and educators themselves.

The toolkit is not a script. It is a set of tools — and like any good set of tools, it is most useful when you understand what each one is for and feel free to adapt it to the situation in front of you.



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PART ONE —WHY IMPROVISATION?

The Problem This Toolkit Addresses

Think about the last time you walked into a room where you did not know the rules. Where the language being spoken was not yours, where the social codes were unfamiliar, where making a mistake felt genuinely risky. Now imagine that this is not an occasional experience, but the daily reality of your educational life.



For millions of adult learners across Europe, this is not a thought experiment. Migrants and refugees navigating new countries, adults returning to learning after years of exclusion, people whose first experiences of education left them with a deep sense that they were not the kind of person education was for: these learners arrive in our classrooms carrying real weight. And too often, the methods we use are not designed with them in mind.

Where Traditional Education Fails

Formal and non-formal adult education has made enormous progress in recent decades. But it still tends to rest on a set of assumptions that quietly exclude the most vulnerable learners.

It assumes a shared language. It assumes a baseline of academic confidence. It assumes that learners are comfortable sitting still, answering questions, and performing competence in front of others. It assumes, in short, that the main job of the educator is to deliver content, and that the main job of the learner is to receive it.

This model of education, what Freire (1970) called the "banking concept," treats learners as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Conventional education treats students the way a bank treats an account: the teacher "deposits" knowledge into the student, who passively receives, stores, and returns it on demand (in tests, recitations, etc.).

The student in this model is not a thinking subject but a container. They do not question, interpret, or create — they accumulate and reproduce what the teacher has put in. It positions the educator as the authority and the learner as passive. For adults who already feel marginalised, this dynamic does not just fail to help. It can actively reinforce the sense that they do not belong.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) emphasise that adult learning is fundamentally different from childhood education: adults bring rich life experience to the learning space, and they learn best when that experience is acknowledged, engaged, and built upon. When educational methods ignore this, they lose the most powerful resource in the room.

The Barriers for Vulnerable Learners

For migrants, refugees, and adults with fewer opportunities, the barriers to participation are not abstract. They are concrete and layered, and they often reinforce each other.

Language gaps are the most visible barrier, but they are rarely just about vocabulary. Language carries culture, status, and identity. An adult who speaks fluently in their first language, who may be a professional, a parent, a community leader, can feel suddenly reduced to a child the moment they are asked to express themselves in a language they are still learning. The fear of saying something wrong, of being misunderstood or judged, can be enough to produce silence.

Low confidence is closely related, but it runs deeper than language. Many adults in vulnerable situations have had educational experiences that taught them, directly or indirectly, that they were not capable learners. They may have left school early, been placed in low-expectation tracks, or simply never found a learning environment that felt safe enough



to take risks in. By the time they arrive in an adult education setting, the habit of self-protection can be stronger than the desire to engage.

Cultural distance adds another layer. Educational norms are not universal. What counts as respectful participation, how one is supposed to relate to a facilitator, whether it is appropriate to express disagreement or show emotion, all of these vary enormously across cultural contexts. A learner who behaves according to the norms of their own background may be misread as disengaged, resistant, or difficult. And a learner who senses that their cultural frame is not welcome will often disengage rather than risk the exposure of getting it wrong.

Fear of judgment ties all of these together. It is perhaps the single most powerful barrier to learning in any context, and it is especially acute for adults who are already in a precarious social position. When the stakes of making a mistake feel high, people stop taking risks. And learning, by definition, requires the willingness to not yet know.

What Educators Need

Educators working with these groups are often deeply committed and highly skilled. But they face a methodological challenge: how do you create meaningful learning when the usual tools do not work?

A facilitator cannot simply explain their way past a language barrier. A worksheet cannot build the kind of trust that allows a traumatised person to take a creative risk. A lecture cannot give someone back the confidence that years of exclusion have taken away.

What is needed are methods that are **low-threshold**: accessible to people regardless of their language level, educational background, or cultural familiarity with the learning context. Methods that are **body-based**: that engage people through movement, gesture, and presence, not just through words. Methods that are **relational**: that build connection between participants, rather than positioning each learner as an isolated individual trying to keep up. Methods that treat the diversity as a resource rather than a problem.

This is what improvisation offers. And it is why this toolkit exists.

What Improvisation Offers

Improvisation is often misunderstood. In everyday language, to improvise means to act without proper preparation. In educational practice, it means something quite different: a structured approach to spontaneous, collaborative action in which participants create together in real time, without a script and without a predetermined outcome.

This distinction matters. Improvisation is not chaos. It is a disciplined practice with its own principles, its own history, and a growing body of research behind it. And it turns out to be remarkably well suited to the challenges described in the previous section.

Learning Through the Body

Most educational methods are language-dependent. Even highly participatory approaches, such as group discussion, debate, or collaborative writing, require learners to articulate themselves verbally, in the dominant language of the room. For learners who do not yet have that language, or who have learned to distrust their own voice in formal settings, this is a wall before the learning has even begun.

Improvisation works differently. It is, at its core, an embodied practice. Participants communicate through movement, gesture, eye contact, timing, and physical presence, not just through words. A learner who cannot yet say what they mean in the group's shared language can still make a choice, respond to a partner, contribute to a scene, and be seen doing so. The body becomes a legitimate medium of expression, and that changes everything.

This aligns with what Kolb (2015) describes as experiential learning: the idea that learning is not primarily a cognitive event but a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, and active experimentation. Improvisation is experiential learning in its most immediate form. You do not study it and then apply it. You learn by doing, by noticing what happened, and by trying again.



Photo: Jana Mirina

Why It Works Where Other Methods Struggle

Three features of improvisation make it particularly effective in contexts where conventional methods fall short.



It is non-verbal or it does not require verbal fluency to participate meaningfully. Exercises can be designed to work entirely through sound and movement, or to use language in ways that are playful and low-stakes rather than evaluative. A learner who would freeze if asked to introduce themselves in front of a group may find it entirely natural to mirror a partner's movement, or to pass an imaginary object around a circle. The content of the exercise is simple; the learning underneath it is not.

It is co-creative. In improvisation, nothing is produced alone. Every scene, every game, every exercise is built jointly, in the moment, by the people in the room. This shifts the social dynamic of the learning space in a fundamental way. There is no single expert producing knowledge for others to consume. There is only a group of people making something together, and everyone's contribution is necessary for it to work. Johnstone (1979) described this as the essence of good improvisation: the willingness to make your partner look good, to accept what they offer and build on it. In an educational context, this principle actively dismantles the hierarchy that makes so many vulnerable learners feel like they do not belong.

It is low-stakes. In improvisation, there are no wrong answers. A scene that goes in an unexpected direction is not a failure; it is interesting. A choice that surprises everyone, including the person who made it, is celebrated rather than corrected. Spolin (1963), who developed some of the foundational frameworks for improvisational theatre training, built her entire approach around the idea that people learn best through play: when the pressure to perform correctly is removed, genuine experimentation becomes possible. For adults who have spent years protecting themselves from the judgment of educational environments, this is not a small thing.



Photo: Jana Mirina



Structured Freedom

There is a paradox at the heart of improvisation. Improvisation feels free. Participants are not following a script, not producing a predetermined outcome, not being evaluated against a fixed standard. And yet the best improvisational practice is highly structured. There are clear rules, clear roles, clear boundaries within which the spontaneity happens. Johnstone (1979) was explicit about this: freedom in improvisation does not come from the absence of structure but from the presence of the right kind of structure, one that is simple enough to internalise and flexible enough to allow genuine surprise.

This insight transfers directly to educational facilitation. A well-designed improvisation exercise gives participants just enough constraint to feel safe and just enough openness to feel alive. The facilitator's job is not to control what happens but to hold the conditions that allow something real to happen. This is a different kind of authority from the one most educators are trained in, and it is one that tends to work much better with learners who have reason to distrust authority.

What the Research Shows

The evidence base for improvisation in educational and therapeutic contexts has grown substantially in recent years, and the findings are consistent across different populations and settings.

Felsman et al. (2020) found that participation in improvisation programmes significantly increased divergent thinking and tolerance for uncertainty, alongside measurable improvements in affective wellbeing. Divergent thinking is the cognitive capacity to generate multiple possible responses to a situation, which is precisely what is needed for creative problem-solving, adaptive communication, and navigating unfamiliar social environments. For learners whose lives require constant adaptation, this is directly useful.

Ritter and Mostert (2022) documented the perceived effects of improvisation on psychological wellbeing, finding that participants reported reduced anxiety, greater emotional flexibility, and improved confidence in social situations. These effects were reported across groups with no background in theatre or the arts.

Kühner et al. (2024) found that improvisation training improved participants' ability to handle unexpected social situations and to respond flexibly when their expectations were violated. This is a particularly relevant for intercultural learning, where the gap between what someone expects and what actually happens can be a source of significant stress and misunderstanding.

Taken together, these findings point in a consistent direction. Improvisation builds the capacities that matter most for adult learners in vulnerable situations: the ability to tolerate uncertainty, to communicate across difference, to take risks in the presence of others, and to recover quickly when things do not go as planned. These are not soft skills. They are the foundations of social participation.



The Four Principles of Improvisation

Good improvisation does not happen by accident. Behind the apparent spontaneity is a set of principles that shape how participants relate to each other, to the space, and to the act of making something together. These principles are not rules. They are ways of paying attention and acting that create the conditions for genuine learning.

The four principles presented here are drawn from the foundational work of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, two practitioners who, working independently on different sides of the Atlantic, arrived at remarkably similar conclusions about what makes improvisation work. Spolin (1963) developed her framework through decades of community theatre practice, insisting that spontaneity and play are not the opposite of rigour but its most productive form. Johnstone (1979) approached the same question from theatre training, arguing that the habits which block creativity — self-consciousness, the fear of being wrong, the need to control outcomes — are learned, and can therefore be unlearned.

Together, their work points to four core principles that run through every exercise in this toolkit. Each principle has a specific educational meaning and a corresponding task for the facilitator. Understanding them before you begin is not just useful preparation. It is the difference between running activities and facilitating learning.

PRINCIPLE	EDUCATIONAL MEANING	EDUCATOR'S TASK
 Sensitivity	Awareness of self, group and context — noticing what is happening in the room and responding to it	<i>Observe and adapt; read the energy of the group before and during the exercise</i>
 Partners	Cooperation and active listening — learning happens in relation to others, not in isolation	<i>Build on learners' contributions; make every participant feel heard and valued</i>
 Space	Embodied and situated learning — the body, the room, and movement are all part of the learning	<i>Use the room, movement, and materials intentionally; invite physical engagement</i>
 Do It	Experimentation and confidence — acting before thinking, trusting impulse over perfection	<i>Lower fear of mistakes; model willingness to try and fail in front of the group</i>
◆ Project motto: No mistakes — everything is useful.		

Adapted from Spolin (1963) and Johnstone (1979)

How Adults Learn: A Short Framework for Educators

Every exercise in this toolkit rests on specific assumptions about how humans learn, what gets in the way of learning, and what conditions allow it to flourish. This section makes those assumptions explicit.

Understanding the four ideas below will help you make better decisions in the room: when to push forward, when to slow down, why a particular exercise is placed where it is, and what you are actually trying to achieve when you ask a group of adults to pass an imaginary object around a circle.



Photo: Jana Mirina

1. Experiential Learning: You Learn by Doing

The oldest and most robust insight in adult education is also the most frequently ignored in practice: people do not learn by being told things. They learn by doing something, noticing what happened, making sense of it, and trying again.

This cycle was described by Dewey (1938), who argued that genuine education is rooted in experience rather than transmission. Kolb (2015) later formalised it into a four-stage model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Boud et al. (1985) extended this further by placing reflection at the centre of the process, arguing that experience alone is not enough. Turning experience into meaning produces learning.



That is why the exercises in this toolkit are not warm-ups or icebreakers. They are the learning. The debrief conversation that follows an exercise is not an optional extra; it is where most of the cognitive and emotional processing happens. A facilitator who skips the reflection phase is cutting the learning cycle in half.

This also means that your role is not to explain improvisation to your participants. It is to create the conditions in which they can experience it, and then help them make sense of what they experienced.

2. Psychological Safety: Risk Requires Trust

Learning requires risk. To try something new, to make a mistake in front of others, to say something uncertain or incomplete — all of these are acts of exposure. And people will only expose themselves in this way if they feel genuinely safe from judgment, ridicule, or social penalty.

Edmondson (2019) defines psychological safety as the shared belief within a group that it is safe to take interpersonal risks. Her research, conducted primarily in workplace teams, consistently shows that psychological safety is the single strongest predictor of whether people will speak up, experiment, and learn from failure. Without it, people default to self-protection: they stay quiet, they do what is expected, they avoid standing out.

For adult learners in vulnerable situations, the stakes of this are particularly high. Many have already learned, through painful experience, that educational environments are not safe. They have been corrected, dismissed, or made to feel inadequate. Rebuilding the expectation of safety takes time and consistency.

Charteris et al. (2024) extend this to creative learning contexts specifically, finding that psychological safety is not just a precondition for learning but something that is actively produced and maintained through the facilitator's behaviour. How you respond to the first person who makes a mistake in your session will set the tone for everything that follows. If you celebrate it, others will begin to believe that mistakes are genuinely welcome. If you move past it too quickly, or worse, correct it, the group will notice.

This is why the project motto — *no mistakes, everything is useful* — is not just a nice slogan. It is a pedagogical commitment that needs to be demonstrated, not just stated.

3. Embodied Learning: The Body Knows Better

Western educational traditions have long treated the body as a problem to be managed: something that fidgets, distracts, and needs to be kept still so that the real work of thinking can happen. This assumption is not only philosophically questionable; it is increasingly contradicted by evidence.

Hegna and Ørbæk (2024), reviewing empirical studies on embodied teaching and learning in higher education, found consistent evidence that physical engagement deepens cognitive processing, emotional connection, and memory retention. When learners use their bodies — moving through space, gesturing, making physical contact with materials or other people —

they are not taking a break from learning. They are learning through a different and often more durable channel.

Castro-Alonso et al. (2024) point to the role of gesture and movement in supporting the processing of abstract concepts, particularly for learners who are working in a second language. When words are not yet available, the body often is. A learner who cannot articulate what they understood from an exercise may be able to show it, and that showing is itself a form of knowing.

An educator who relies exclusively on verbal instruction and verbal response will systematically exclude learners whose verbal access to the learning language is limited. An educator who builds in physical engagement, movement, and non-verbal expression opens the learning to everyone in the room.

The exercises in this toolkit are designed with this in mind. Many of them begin in the body and move toward language, rather than the other way around.



Photo: Jana Mirina

4. Transformative Learning: Participation Can Change You

Mezirow (2000) proposed that the deepest form of adult learning is not the acquisition of new information but a shift in how a person understands themselves and the world. He called this transformative learning: a process in which a disorienting experience prompts critical reflection, which in turn leads to a new way of seeing.

Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) connect transformative learning to disruption and displacement that many adult learners in vulnerable situations have experienced, arguing that



creative educational approaches are particularly well placed to support this process. When a person who has been excluded from a learning space discovers through experience that they can make something, contribute something, lead something, this discovery can be genuinely transformative.

This does not mean that every improvisation session will change lives. It means that the cumulative experience of being seen, heard, and valued in a learning space — of having your contribution accepted and built upon, of making something together with people who are different from you — can, over time, shift how a person understands what they are capable of.

That is a serious claim, and it deserves to be taken seriously. It is also why the facilitation choices you make matter far beyond the individual exercise. You are not just running a session. You are contributing to the conditions in which transformation becomes possible.



Photo: Jana Mirina

PART TWO — THE EXERCISES

This part of the toolkit is the practical core. It contains seven sections, each targeting a distinct set of skills that research and practice have identified as essential for vulnerable adult learners (Edmondson, 2019; Illeris, 2018; Ritter & Mostert, 2022; Van Houte & Rast, 2024). The sections are designed to be used in sequence across multiple sessions, but individual exercises can also be selected and combined according to the needs of a specific group.



Each exercise follows the same format: a short description of its goal and format, step-by-step instructions, facilitator notes, and debrief questions. Exercises are marked as **offline only** or **offline and online**, and rated by difficulty level — **entry**, **intermediate**, or **advanced** — so that educators without a background in theatre or improvisation can make informed choices about what to use and when.

Each section has been reduced to two or three exercises that are accessible to non-specialist facilitators and adaptable to both in-person and online settings. The full range of exercises from which these were selected is available in the supplementary exercise bank.

The seven sections follow a deliberate arc. They begin with the most fundamental condition for any learning — feeling safe — and move progressively toward more complex, expressive, and socially engaged work. A group that has moved through all seven sections will have practised not just improvisation, but a full set of human capacities that matter far beyond the learning space.

1. Opening the Space: Safety and First Contact. Before anything else can happen, people need to feel that it is safe to be in the room. For many vulnerable adult learners — migrants navigating a new country, adults returning to education after long absence, people whose previous experiences of learning were marked by failure or exclusion — the first moments of a session carry enormous weight. Safety is not a soft precondition. It is the ground on which everything else is built. Without it, creative risk is impossible, connection is superficial, and learning stays at the surface. The exercises in this section are designed to answer the question participants are silently asking from the moment they arrive: *Can I be myself here?*

2. Building the Group: Trust and Connection. Once individuals feel safe, the next step is to help them feel that they belong to something together. A group is not simply a collection of people in the same room. It is a social organism that needs to be built — through shared experience, mutual attention, and the gradual discovery that others are willing to support your ideas and presence. Trust and connection are not abstract values; they are practical capacities that make collaborative learning possible. For adults who have often been isolated by language, status, or circumstance, the experience of genuine group belonging can itself be transformative.

3. Listening and Dialogue. Language barriers are one of the most visible challenges in diverse adult learning groups, but the deeper challenge is not linguistic. It is relational. Listening — real listening, the kind that registers tone, intention, and emotion as much as words — is a skill that most people have never been explicitly taught. For learners who are communicating across language and cultural difference, the ability to listen beyond words is not a nice extra. It is the difference between connection and isolation. The exercises in this section train active listening, turn-taking, and the capacity to make meaning together even when shared vocabulary is limited.

4. Emotional Awareness and Resilience. Adults in vulnerable situations carry emotional weight that does not disappear when they enter a learning space. Anxiety about making mistakes, fear of judgment, the accumulated experience of not belonging — these are not personal failings. They are rational responses to real conditions. Emotional resilience, in this context, does not mean suppressing difficult feelings. It means developing the capacity to stay present with uncertainty, to recover from mistakes without shame, and to use emotional



experience as information rather than obstacle. These are learnable skills, and improvisation is one of the most effective ways to practise them.

5. Creativity, Inclusion and Intercultural Dialogue. Creativity is often treated as a talent that some people have and others do not. In this toolkit, it is treated as a practice — something that emerges when the right conditions are in place. For diverse groups, creative collaboration has a particular value: it creates a shared task that does not belong to any one cultural tradition, where no one's way of doing things is automatically correct, and where difference becomes a resource rather than a barrier. The exercises in this section are designed to help groups make things together across language and cultural difference, discovering in the process that diversity in the room is not a problem to be managed but a creative asset.

6. Civic Voice and Self-Expression. Finding one's voice — the capacity to speak from one's own experience, to name what matters, to participate in public life — is both a personal and a political act. For adults who have been marginalised by migration, poverty, or exclusion, the distance between private experience and public expression can feel very large. This section draws on the tradition of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) to offer exercises that help participants connect their own stories to broader social themes, practise speaking on civic topics, and experience what it feels like to be heard. This is not political education in a narrow sense. It is the practice of democratic participation.

7. Closing and Reflection. How a session ends matters as much as how it begins. Reflection is not a formality to be rushed through in the last five minutes. It is the moment when experience becomes learning — when what happened in the room is named, integrated, and carried forward. For adults who are not used to being asked what they think or how they feel, a well-facilitated closing can be as significant as any exercise. The exercises in this section offer different ways to close a session: some verbal, some physical, some written, all designed to help participants leave with something concrete — a word, an image, a commitment, a sense of having been present for something that mattered.



Photo: Jana Mirina

1. Opening the Space: Safety and First Contact

Goal: Help participants feel safe enough to join and take their first creative steps.

The first moments of any session are the most important. Before any learning can happen, participants need to answer a question they may not even consciously be asking: *Is it safe to be here?* For adults who have experienced exclusion, judgment, or failure in educational settings, this question is not rhetorical. It is a genuine test, and they are running it from the moment they walk in.

The exercises in this section are designed to answer that question clearly and quickly. They are low-threshold, physically gentle, and structured so that every participant can succeed from the very first action. There are no wrong moves here. The facilitator's task is not to teach anything yet, but to build the shared expectation that this space works differently from the ones participants may have known before (Edmondson, 2019; Charteris et al., 2024).

Boal (1979) described the first contact between participants as a political act: the way a group begins together shapes the power dynamics that will govern everything that follows. These exercises are designed to begin on equal footing.



Exercise 1.1: Introduction with Gestures



10–15 minutes



8–25 people



Online/offline



Entry level



Goal: warm-up/trust: Helps participants introduce themselves without relying on language. Every person succeeds immediately. Sets the tone that this space welcomes all forms of expression.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand in a circle. 2. Explain that each person will introduce themselves using only their name and one gesture — any movement that feels natural or meaningful to them. It does not need to make sense to anyone else. 3. Model it yourself first: say your name clearly and make a gesture (a wave, a stretch, a clap, anything). 4. After each person introduces themselves, the whole group repeats their name and gesture together. 5. Continue around the circle until everyone has gone.	1. Ask participants to turn their cameras on so everyone is visible. 2. Explain the same premise: each person will say their name and make one gesture to the camera. It does not need to make sense to anyone else. 3. Model it yourself first: say your name and make a gesture clearly visible on camera. 4. After each person goes, the whole group repeats their name and gesture together — on mute, so the visual is clear. 5. Go around in gallery order until everyone has gone.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Participants who hesitate or say "I don't know what to do" — reassure them that any movement counts, including standing still or shrugging. • Watch for laughter when the group repeats a gesture: this is a good sign. It signals relaxation, not mockery. • Notice who avoids eye contact and who seeks it. This gives you information about the group's comfort level.	• Participants who keep their camera off may be self-conscious. Do not force it, but gently invite them: "Even a small gesture in the corner of the screen is enough." • The group mirroring online is slightly less immediate than offline — slow the pace to allow it to land. • Watch for participants who make very minimal gestures; this is fine and valid.



Debrief questions

- How did it feel to have your gesture repeated by the whole group?
- Did anything surprise you — in yourself or in others?
- What did you notice about the room by the end?



Exercise 1.2: Name and Movement Circle



10 minutes



8–20 people



Offline only



Entry level



Goal: warm-up / connection: Builds on first introductions by adding movement and energy. Participants learn each other's names through doing rather than memorising. Trains the habit of making genuine contact — eye contact, attention, presence — before moving on.



Instructions

1. Stand in a circle. Explain that the group will pass energy around the circle using name and movement.
2. One person starts: they turn to the person next to them, make eye contact, say that person's name, and pass a simple movement (a clap, a nod, a stomp).
3. The receiver accepts it — mirroring the movement briefly — then turns to the next person and passes a new movement with their name.
4. Continue until the energy has gone around the full circle.
5. Speed up gradually in subsequent rounds, encouraging spontaneity over precision.



What to watch for

- Participants who do not yet know each other's names: this is fine and expected. Encourage guessing or asking quietly.
- The pace of the circle tells you a lot about the group's energy. If it is very slow, slow down your own facilitation to match before gradually picking up.
- Watch for participants who laugh at their own mistakes — this is exactly the culture you are building.



Debrief questions

- Did the exercise get easier or harder as it went on? Why do you think that is?
- What helped you feel connected to the person you were passing to?



Exercise 1.3: Yes, Let's



10-15 minutes



8-30 people



Online/offline



Intermediate level



Goal: group agency / creative confidence: Practicing the core improvisation principle of accepting and building on others' ideas.



Instructions

Offline	Online
- Participants move freely around the space. - Anyone can call out a simple action at any time: "Let's walk like we're in deep snow!" "Let's be very happy to see each other!" "Let's move in slow motion!" - The whole group responds immediately with "Yes, let's!" and does the action. - After a few moments, anyone else can call out a new suggestion. - Encourage participants to make suggestions. The facilitator starts but should step back quickly.	- Ask participants to turn cameras on and find a small space where they can move — away from their desk if possible. - Explain the same premise. Suggestions are called out verbally; the group responds from wherever they are in their own space. - The whole group unmutes briefly to say "Yes, let's!" together, then mutes again and does the action on camera. - After a few moments, anyone can call out a new suggestion. The facilitator starts but steps back quickly. - If the group is hesitant, use the chat: invite participants to type a suggestion, then call it out.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
- Participants who do not make suggestions: do not pressure them. The exercise works even if only a few people suggest, but notice who does not. - Suggestions that are very small ("let's... walk normally?") are fine. Celebrate them. - If the group gets stuck, offer a suggestion yourself to restart the flow	- The slight audio delay can make the collective "Yes, let's!" feel ragged. This is fine — lean into it as part of the exercise. - Watch for participants who are clearly enjoying themselves on camera but not making suggestions; a private chat message can gently invite them in.



Debrief questions

- What did it feel like to say "Yes, let's" before you knew what was coming?
- Did you make a suggestion? What made you decide to, or not to?
- What does it feel like when a whole group says yes to your idea?



Exercise 1.4: Mirror Walk



15 minutes



8–24 people (pairs)



Online/offline



Intermediate



Goal: listening / attunement: Practice non-verbal listening and shared focus. Build trust between partners by exploring leading, following, and shared leadership without words.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to find a partner, someone they do not know well. Partners stand facing each other. 2. One person leads, one follows. The leader moves slowly, while the follower mirrors the movement as precisely as possible, as if they are a reflection in a mirror. 3. Key instruction: move slowly enough that your partner can follow. The goal is to stay connected. 4. After 3–4 minutes, call "switch". The follower becomes the leader. 5. After another 3–4 minutes, invite both partners to lead simultaneously — no designated leader. 6. Bring the group back together and invite brief observations from pairs.	1. Put participants into breakout rooms. 2. One person leads, one follows. The leader moves slowly while the follower mirrors what they see on screen. 3. Key instruction: move slowly enough that the screen delay does not break the connection. Slow, deliberate movements work best online. 4. After 3–4 minutes, send a message in the breakout room chat: "switch." The follower becomes the leader. 5. After another 3–4 minutes, invite both to lead simultaneously. The screen delay makes it more challenging online. 6. Bring everyone back to the main room and invite brief observations from pairs.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• The shift to simultaneous leading is the key moment. Watch for pairs who find a shared rhythm. • Some participants may feel self-conscious about being watched; remind the group that everyone is focused on their partner. • Participants who move very fast may feel uncomfortable. Encourage slowing down.	• Warn about the screen delay in advance: "<i>It won't be exact — that's fine. Stay with the intention.</i>" • Watch for participants who give up on the simultaneous phase; encourage them to treat the delay as part of the exercise rather than a failure.



Debrief questions

- What was the difference between leading, following, and sharing the lead?
- Did you ever lose track of who was leading? What did that feel like?
- What did you learn about your partner without using words?



Exercise 1.5: Safe Space Agreement



15 -20 minutes



Any size



Online/offline



Entry level



Goal: psychological safety / shared norms: Creates a group-owned agreement about how the space will work. Makes safety and consent explicit from the start.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Bring the group together after the first movement exercises. Explain: the group will create a shared agreement — commitments made together. 2. Ask: "<i>What do you need in order to feel safe enough to try things here?</i>" Invite responses freely. Write every contribution on the flipchart without editing or judging. 3. Common contributions include: no laughing at each other, what happens here stays here, it's okay to say no, mistakes are welcome. Accept all of them. 4. When the list feels complete, read it back to the group and ask if anything is missing. 5. Invite everyone to signal agreement — a nod, a raised hand, a collective "yes." Post the agreement on the wall. 6. Refer back to it if the group's energy shifts or if a difficult moment arises later.	1. Bring the group together in the main room with cameras on. Have a shared document or whiteboard open and visible on screen. 2. Explain the same premise. Let participants see the document being built in real time as contributions are added. 3. Ask the same question. Invite responses verbally or via the chat. Add every contribution to the shared document without editing or judging. 4. Read chat contributions aloud as you add them, so participants without strong reading skills can follow. 5. When the list feels complete, read it back aloud and ask if anything is missing. 6. Invite everyone to signal agreement on camera — a nod, a thumbs up, or a wave. Share the document link in the chat. 7. Refer back to it in subsequent sessions.



What to watch for — offline

Offline	Online
• Participants who say nothing are still listening and observing — their silence is not disengagement. • Specific anxieties ("<i>I don't want to be filmed,</i>" "<i>I don't want to be touched</i>") need to be integrated explicitly. • Being asked what you need, and seeing it written down, is important for those used to being told how things will work.	• The chat option makes it easier for quieter participants to contribute without speaking — watch for contributions that arrive after the verbal discussion has moved on, and read them aloud. • If the group is very quiet, offer two or three starter contributions yourself and invite the group to add or change them.



Debrief questions

- Is there anything on this list that surprised you?
- How does it feel to make agreement together, rather than having it handed to you?



Section Debrief Guide

After completing the exercises in this section, take 10 minutes for a brief whole-group reflection before moving on. The goal is not to analyse what happened but to mark the transition: the group has done something together, and that matters.

Suggested questions:

- What is one word for how you feel right now, compared to when you walked in?
- Did anything in these exercises surprise you?
- What did you notice about the group as a whole?

Keep this light. The deeper reflection will come later. For now, the most important thing is that participants leave this section feeling that the space is theirs, that they have already succeeded at something, and that the person next to them is a collaborator, not a stranger.

Adaptation Notes

For groups with significant language barriers: Prioritise exercises 1, 2, and 4 (gesture and movement-based). Run the Safe Space Agreement with visual support — drawings, symbols, or translated key words — rather than relying on verbal contributions alone.

For groups with trauma histories or high anxiety: Slow everything down. Give more time between instructions. Make participation explicitly optional at every stage ("you can watch and join when you're ready"). In the Mirror Walk, allow participants to work at a greater physical distance if needed.

For groups who are sceptical or resistant ("this is childish"): Name the paradox directly: *"These exercises look simple. That's intentional. We'll talk about why they work after we've tried them."* Connecting the debrief to professional relevance helps — ask what these skills (listening, co-creation, trust) look like in their own work.

For very large groups (25+): Run exercises 1 and 2 in the full circle, then split into smaller groups of 8–10 for exercises 3 and 4. Bring the full group back together for the Safe Space Agreement.



Photo: Jana Mirina

2. Building the Group: Trust and Connection

Goal: Transform a collection of individuals into a learning community.

Once people feel safe enough to be in the room, the next step is to help them feel that they are in the room together. Trust and connection are not abstract qualities; they are built through small, repeated experiences of listening, being listened to, acting together, and discovering that others are willing to support your ideas.

The exercises in this section are designed to shift the group from “many individuals” to “one ensemble.” They move between verbal and non-verbal modes, between pairs and whole-group work, and they intentionally blur the boundary between leader and follower. Cooperative learning theory emphasises that people learn best when they work in interdependent groups rather than as isolated individuals (Illeris, 2018).

Johnstone’s improvisation work shows the same thing from a theatre perspective: creativity emerges when participants actively make each other look good, not when they compete for attention (Johnstone, 1979).



Exercise 2.1: Interview and Introduction



20–25 minutes



24 people (pairs)



Online/offline



Entry level



Goal: listening / first connections: Help participants get to know each other beyond surface details. Practice focused listening and the experience of being heard within the group.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to find a partner they do not know well. 2. Explain that they will interview each other for a few minutes, then introduce their partner to the group. The aim is to listen. 3. Offer simple guiding questions, such as: <i>What brought you here today? Something you enjoy doing outside of work. One thing you would like to learn or practise in this course.</i> 4. Ask partners to decide who interviews first. Give 4–5 minutes for the first interview, then 4–5 minutes for the second. Remind them that taking notes is allowed. 5. Bring everyone back into a circle or seated group. 6. Ask each person to introduce their partner to the group in 1–2 minutes, using at least one detail that surprised them. 7. Continue until all pairs have introduced each other.	1. Ask participants to pair up. Send each pair into a breakout room. 2. Explain the same task: they will interview each other, then introduce their partner to the whole group. Emphasise listening. 3. Share the guiding questions in the chat before opening breakout rooms: <i>What brought you here today? Something you enjoy doing outside of work. One thing you would like to learn or practise in this course.</i> 4. Open breakout rooms for 10 minutes. Partners can decide who interviews first. Switch after about 5 minutes. 5. Close the breakout rooms and bring everyone back to the main room. 6. Invite each person, in turn, to introduce their partner in 1–2 minutes. Ask them to include at least one detail that surprised them. 7. Continue until all partners have been introduced.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may be formal. Remind them to be human. • Watch for introductions that reduce a person to their role (e.g. only talking about their job). Model a more rounded introduction yourself by including something personal. • The room often grows warmer and more attentive with each introduction.	• In breakout rooms, some pairs may get stuck. You can prompt to all rooms: <i>"What surprised you about your partner?"</i> • When introducing partners in the main room, some people may read mechanically from notes. Invite them to look at the camera and speak in their own words. • Participants sometimes add brief supportive responses that show connection forming.



Debrief questions

- How did it feel to be introduced by someone else?
- Did you hear anything in the introductions that made you think, "I didn't expect that"?
- What did you notice about the way people listened while others were speaking?



Exercise 2.2: Collective Counting



10–15 minutes



6–20 people



Online/offline



Entry level



Goal: group listening / shared attention Practise non-verbal coordination and shared timing. Helps the group experience how attention and restraint make collective action possible — without anyone being in charge.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand in a circle. 2. Explain the task: the group will collectively count from 1 upwards (to 20, or another number that fits your time). Only one person can say a number at a time. If two or more people speak at once, the group goes back to 1. 3. There is no assigned order. Anyone can say the next number whenever they feel ready. 4. Begin: someone says "1" out loud. Then, whenever someone feels ready, they say "2," and so on. 5. Each time the group overlaps (two voices at once), pause briefly, smile, and go back to "1." 6. Repeat until the group successfully reaches the target number at least once.	1. Ask participants to switch to gallery view so they can see everyone. 2. Explain the same task: the group counts from 1 upwards; only one person at a time can speak. If two or more speak at once, go back to 1. There is no fixed order. 3. Ask everyone to unmute for the duration of the exercise. 4. Begin: someone says "1." Then, whenever someone feels ready, they say "2," and so on. 5. Each time there is overlap, pause, smile, and start again from "1." Acknowledge that online delay makes this harder — that is part of the exercise. 6. Continue until the group reaches the target number. Lower the target if connection is difficult.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• At first, the group may rush or hesitate. Both are normal. • Watch how participants begin to use eye contact, pauses, and body language to coordinate without explicit instruction — this is the group learning to listen as a whole. • Do not treat overlaps as failure. Your tone — light and playful — is crucial.	• Online delay makes overlaps more likely. Normalise this from the start so participants do not feel they have spoiled it. • Watch for people who never speak. You can invite them gently: "If you haven't spoken yet, see if you'd like to take a number in the next round."



Debrief questions

- What helped the group reach the higher numbers?
- Did you change your behaviour as the game went on — waiting longer, making more eye contact?
- What does this exercise show about how we make decisions together without speaking about them?



Exercise 2.3: Group Rhythm



10–15 minutes



8–30 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: embodied co-ordination Create a shared rhythm using simple percussion. Helps participants feel themselves as part of a collective pattern rather than as isolated individuals.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand or sit where they can see and hear each other clearly. 2. Explain that the group will create a shared rhythm using claps, taps, stomps, snaps. 3. Start with something simple: clap a steady beat and invite the group to clap with you. 4. Once the basic pulse is established, invite participants to add small variations, for example: One person adds a foot stomp on every second beat. Another adds a finger snap on every fourth beat. Others add gentle chest taps or thigh taps. 5. Build gradually, layering rhythms until the group creates a simple "orchestra" of sounds. 6. After a minute or two, invite the group to slowly fade the rhythm out together, returning to silence. 7. Optionally, invite someone from the group to start a new rhythm.	1. Ask participants to sit or stand where they can be seen from the shoulders up, with microphones on. 2. Explain the same idea: the group will create a shared rhythm using claps, taps, or snaps. Acknowledge in advance that online sound delay means it will be imperfect: this is fine. 3. Start with a simple clap beat and invite the group to clap along. Ask them to listen more to you than to each other to reduce echo. 4. Once there is a basic pulse, invite 2–3 volunteers to add a simple variation (a snap every second beat or a tap on the table every fourth beat). Keep the total number of extra parts small to avoid audio chaos. 5. After a while, invite everyone to fade out together, ending with one last unified clap. 6. Optionally, invite a participant to lead a second round — they keep the basic pulse while others layer small variations.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may feel rhythmically insecure and try to hide. Encourage simple, small contributions; even a soft tap counts. • Watch for dominance. If one person keeps changing the beat or making very loud sounds, gently remind everyone that the goal is to listen and blend, not to stand out. • Notice the moment when the group sound "locks in" and feels coherent; this is often accompanied by smiles or relaxation.	• Keep the structure simple and the number of simultaneous sounds limited. • Invite participants to use softer sounds where possible to reduce audio overload. • Watch for participants who are clearly engaged but have turned off their sound because of echo — acknowledge their visual participation as equally valid.



Debrief questions

- Did you feel more connected to the group when the rhythm settled?
- What helped you find your place in the group sound?
- How is this different from everyone doing their own rhythm separately?



Exercise 2.4: Human Machine



15–20 minutes



8–30 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: co-creation / awareness of the whole Build a "human machine" where each person contributes one repeating movement and sound. Highlights how individual actions combine into a collective pattern — and what it feels like to be one part of a larger whole.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand in an open space where they can move freely. 2. Explain that the group will build a <i>human machine</i>: each person will add one repeating movement and sound, and these will form a living mechanism. 3. Invite one volunteer to start a simple movement with a sound (e.g., an arm circle with a <i>whoosh</i>, a knee bend with a <i>clunk</i>). 4. Invite another person to join with a different movement and sound. 5. Invite people to join one by one until everyone is part of the machine. Keep movements safe and simple. 6. Let the machine run for 30–60 seconds, then invite the group to collectively slow down and come to a stop. 7. Optionally, run a second round where the machine starts from a different mood (e.g., a <i>sleepy</i> or <i>joyful</i> machine).	1. Ask participants to turn cameras on and make sure they can be seen from at least the chest up. 2. Explain the same idea: the group will build a <i>human machine</i> on screen, each person adding one repeating movement and sound. 3. Invite one volunteer to start: they unmute, begin a simple repeating movement and sound visible on camera, and keep going. 4. Invite others to unmute and add their own movement and sound. Keep movements small enough to stay in frame and sounds simple enough to avoid audio overload. 5. Continue until most or all participants are contributing. 6. Let the machine run for 30–45 seconds, then invite everyone to slow down and stop. 7. Optionally, run a second round with a different mood (for example, a very quiet, <i>whispering</i> machine).



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may initially choose demanding movements. Encourage them to find something sustainable. • Watch how people place themselves in relation to others; they will often instinctively form lines, circles, or clusters. • Notice moments when participants adjust their timing or volume in response to others. This shows awareness of the whole.	• Sound can become chaotic quickly; limit the number of loud or percussive sounds and encourage softer alternatives. • Some participants may contribute movement without sound — this is valid and worth affirming. • Watch for participants who turn off their microphone but continue moving; they are still part of the machine visually.



Debrief questions

- What did it feel like to be one part of a bigger whole?
- Did you pay attention more to yourself or to the group while the machine was running?
- If you think about a "learning group" as a kind of machine, what does this exercise suggest about how it works?



Exercise 2.5: Passing Energy



15–20 minutes



8–25 people



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: non-verbal connection / inclusion Strengthen the sense of connection in the group by passing an "energy ball" using movement and sound. Trains eye contact, timing, and active inclusion of every participant.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand in a circle. 2. Explain that the group will pass an "energy ball" around the circle, using movement and sound to shape it. 3. You start: create a simple movement and sound (for example, a small "whoosh" gesture with your hands) and direct it toward someone else in the circle with clear eye contact. 4. The receiver catches the energy by repeating the movement and sound, then transforms it slightly (changing size, speed, or pitch) and passes it on to another person, again with eye contact. 5. Each person catching and transforming the energy before sending it on. 6. Introduce variations: a) Two energy balls moving at once. b) Making the energy very slow and heavy, then very light and fast.	1. Ask participants to turn cameras on and use gallery view if possible. 2. Explain that the group will pass an "energy ball" on screen using movement and sound. 3. You start: make a simple movement and sound toward the camera and say the name of the person you are sending it to. 4. The named person catches it by repeating the movement and sound, then transforms it slightly (change size, speed, or pitch) and sends it to someone else by name. 5. Continue until several people have been involved. Encourage participants to choose someone who has not yet received the energy. 6. Optional variations: a) Two energy balls moving at once (name the recipient clearly each time). b) A silent version — movement only, no sound.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Observe how people use eye contact and body orientation; these are key signals of genuine connection. • Some may rush their turn, feeling pressure to be "interesting." Remind them that simple transformations are enough. • If someone is consistently skipped, gently intervene and direct an energy ball toward them, modelling inclusion.	• Participants may forget to say the recipient's name. Remind them — naming matters more online than gesturing in a direction. • Watch for participants who seem anxious about making sounds. Keep your own sounds simple and normalise imperfection. • Screen layout differs for each person; naming the recipient clearly is the most reliable way to maintain the flow.



Debrief questions

- What helped you feel that the energy was really going to you — and from you?
- Did you ever feel more connected to the group during this exercise than during ordinary conversation?
- How might "passing energy" relate to how we share attention or responsibility in this group?



Section Debrief Guide

After completing these exercises, take 10–15 minutes for a group reflection. The aim here is to make visible something participants may already be feeling: that the group has begun to function as a community, not just a room full of strangers.

Suggested questions:

- Compared to the beginning of the session, how connected do you feel to the group now?
- Was there a moment in any exercise when you noticed trust increasing?
- Which exercise made you most aware of other people? Why?

You can also invite participants to reflect silently for one minute before speaking, or to share their thoughts in pairs and then in the full group. This honours different comfort levels with speaking in front of others and supports the gradual building of trust.

Adaptation Notes

For groups with significant language barriers: Emphasise Collective Counting, Group Rhythm, Human Machine, and Passing Energy, which rely primarily on movement, sound, and shared timing rather than complex language. For Interview and Introduction, simplify the guiding questions and allow participants to answer in their first language if possible, with translation or summary where needed.

For groups with low confidence or new to group work: Keep Interview and Introduction very simple and short; you can limit the questions to “What brought you here?” and “One thing you enjoy.” Celebrate every introduction, especially when someone speaks who is usually quiet. In Collective Counting, set a modest target (for example, counting to 10) so that success is reachable.

For highly energetic or chaotic groups: Use Collective Counting and Group Rhythm to focus the energy. The requirement to listen and wait will slow the tempo without suppressing engagement. Give very clear, brief instructions and avoid long explanations.

For mixed-status groups (e.g., learners and staff together): Human Machine and Passing Energy are particularly useful because they temporarily flatten hierarchy: everyone is just one part of the machine or one link in the chain. Be conscious in Interview and Introduction to mix roles (staff interviewing learners and vice versa) rather than keeping institutional roles paired together.



Photo: Jana Mirina

3. Listening and Dialogue

Goal: Develop active listening, empathy, and turn-taking across language differences.

Improvisation is often associated with speaking quickly and being witty. In the context of this toolkit, it is almost the opposite: a practice of listening carefully, responding honestly, and staying in relationship even when language is limited or fragile.

Freire (1970) argued that genuine education is dialogical: it happens when people speak with each other, not at each other. Spolin (1963) designed many of her theatre games to train precisely this quality of attention — not as a moral ideal, but as a practical necessity for improvisation to work. Hunt (2024) highlights that intercultural contact becomes meaningful when people are able to listen beyond words, noticing tone, gesture, and emotional intention as much as literal meaning.

The exercises in this section are designed to cultivate that kind of listening. They work at different levels: verbal and non-verbal, serious and playful, individual and collective. All of them assume that communication across difference is possible and worth practising.



Exercise 3.1: Yes, And



10–15 minutes



6–20 people



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: accepting and building / conversational flexibility Builds habits of listening, non-defensiveness, and shared creativity.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Explain the basic rule: one person makes an offer (a simple statement), and the other responds starting with "Yes, and...", adding something that accepts and builds on the first idea. 2. Demonstrate with a volunteer: Person A: <i>"I think we should open a small café."</i> Person B: <i>"Yes, and we'll make it a place where people can read and relax."</i> Person A: <i>"Yes, and every Friday we'll have music."</i> Emphasise that "Yes, and" does not mean literal agreement; it means accepting the idea for the purpose of the exercise and building on it. 3. Ask participants to form pairs. 4. Give a simple starting prompt, for example: <i>"we are planning a trip together"</i> or <i>"we are designing a community garden."</i> 5. In pairs, Person A starts with a sentence. Person B responds with "Yes, and..." and adds something. Continue for 6–8 exchanges, then switch roles so the other person starts a new scenario. 6. After a few minutes, invite one or two pairs to demonstrate a short exchange for the group, if they feel comfortable.	1. Explain the same basic rule and demonstrate briefly with a volunteer on camera using a simple scenario. 2. Ask participants to form pairs in breakout rooms (or trios if numbers are uneven). 3. Share 2–3 starting prompts in the chat before opening breakout rooms, for example: planning a trip, setting up a community event, opening a small café. 4. Open breakout rooms for 6–8 minutes. Ask each pair to run at least two short "Yes, and" conversations, switching who starts each time. 5. Broadcast a reminder halfway through: <i>"Remember to always start your response with 'Yes, and...' and add something new."</i> 6. Bring everyone back to the main room and invite one or two pairs to demonstrate a short exchange.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Many participants will instinctively say "Yes, but..." or contradict. Bring them back to "Yes, and...", explaining that the exercise trains acceptance, not agreement. • Watch for pairs where one person dominates and the other becomes passive. Remind them that every "Yes, and" should add something, however small. • For participants with limited language, encourage very simple sentences.	• In breakout rooms, some pairs may drift into ordinary conversation. Remind them via broadcast to keep the "Yes, and" structure. • Notice pairs who look tense or stuck when they return; a quick group demonstration can reset the tone. • Be attentive to participants whose connections make turn-taking difficult; suggest slightly slower pacing.



Debrief questions

- How did it feel to have your ideas accepted and built upon?
- Was it harder to start the idea or to respond with "Yes, and..."?



Exercise 3.2: Partner Storytelling



20–25 minutes



8–24 people (pairs)



Online / Offline



Intermediate



Goal: deep listening / perspective-taking Experience to be fully listened to, and to retell someone else's story. Highlights differences between speaking, listening, and remembering.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to find a partner (you can keep the same pairs as in Yes, And, or invite them to change). 2. Explain the structure: Round 1: Person A tells a short story from their life (3–4 minutes). Person B listens without interrupting, then retells the story back to Person A in their own words (2–3 minutes). Round 2: Switch roles. 3. Offer simple prompts for the story, such as: <i>"A time you felt welcomed in a new place."</i> <i>"A time you learned something unexpectedly."</i> 4. Emphasise that the listener's task is to pay attention, not to judge or advise. 5. Start Round 1. Give 3–4 minutes for Person A to speak. Ask Person B to focus on listening, eye contact, and non-verbal support. 6. Signal the switch: Person B retells the story back to Person A, starting with <i>"What I heard is..."</i> 7. After Round 1, switch roles and repeat the process. 8. Bring the group back together and invite a few brief reflections, without asking people to share their story content unless they choose to.	1. Explain the same structure and share the prompts in the chat so participants can refer back to them. 2. Put participants into pairs in breakout rooms (or trios if needed, where one person observes). 3. Instruct pairs to follow the same sequence: A tells for 3–4 minutes while B listens; then B retells for 2–3 minutes starting with <i>"What I heard is..."</i>; then switch roles. 4. Open breakout rooms for 12–15 minutes. Switch roles after 6–7 minutes. 5. Bring everyone back to the main room. Invite a few participants to comment on the experience of telling and retelling, without sharing private details.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some listeners will start giving advice, asking questions, or adding their own stories. Remind them that their only role here is to listen and retell. • Watch for emotional stories; if someone becomes visibly moved, keep an eye on them and be ready to follow up individually after the session. • Notice differences in detail when stories are retold — this is useful material for the debrief.	• In breakout rooms you cannot see everything; use broadcast messages to keep pairs on track and on time. • Some participants may feel uneasy speaking about personal experiences online. Emphasise that they can choose lighter stories if they prefer. • When people return, notice who stays quiet during the debrief. Invite them gently with low-pressure questions: <i>"What did you notice about listening?"</i> rather than <i>"What was your story?"</i>



Debrief questions

- As a teller, how did it feel to hear your story in someone else's words?
- As a listener, what helped you remember and retell the story accurately?



Exercise 3.3: Gibberish Conversation



10–15 minutes



4-6 pairs or small groups



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: non-verbal listening Show that tone, rhythm, gesture, and facial expression carry meaning even without shared language. Particularly effective for multilingual groups.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Explain that "<i>gibberish</i>" means nonsense syllables that are not words in any language. 2. Ask participants to form pairs. 3. Explain the task: one person speaks in gibberish; the other responds in gibberish. They have a conversation as if they understand each other perfectly, using tone, rhythm, gesture, and facial expression to convey meaning. 4. Demonstrate briefly with a volunteer, exaggerating emotion and gesture so the group can see how meaning can travel without actual words. 5. Give pairs a simple context, such as: a) Meeting a friend after a long time. b) Discussing an important decision. c) Comforting someone who is upset. 6. After 2–3 minutes ask them to switch who leads if one person spoke more. 7. Optionally, invite one or two pairs to show a short gibberish conversation to the group.	1. Explain that "<i>gibberish</i>" means nonsense syllables that are not words in any language. 2. Ask participants to form pairs. 3. Explain the task: one person speaks in gibberish; the other responds in gibberish. They have a conversation as if they understand each other perfectly, using tone, rhythm, gesture, and facial expression to convey meaning. 4. Demonstrate briefly with a volunteer, exaggerating emotion and gesture so the group can see how meaning can travel without actual words. 5. Give pairs a simple context, such as: a) Meeting a friend after a long time. b) Discussing an important decision. c) Comforting someone who is upset. 6. After 2–3 minutes ask them to switch who leads if one person spoke more. 7. Optionally, invite one or two pairs to show a short gibberish conversation to the group.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• At first, participants may feel silly. Normalise this; laughter is part of the exercise. • Watch for pairs who fall into repetitive patterns (e.g. repeating one syllable). Suggest varying pitch, speed, or intensity. • For multilingual groups, emphasise that gibberish levels the field — no one is relying on any particular language.	• Some participants may turn off their cameras. Encourage them gently but do not force; voice-only participation is valid. • Screen delay can cause overlapping; remind participants that interruption is fine in this context. • Notice how much people use facial expression on camera — this can be a useful observation in the debrief.



Debrief questions

- Were you able to "understand" what your partner was saying, even without real words?
- What carried the meaning for you — tone, gesture, facial expression, rhythm?
- How might this exercise change the way you listen to people?



Exercise 3.4: Emotional Translation



15–20 minutes



8–24 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: emotional attunement / cross-language awareness Practise translating emotion between voice and body. Helps participants notice the emotional layer of communication that exists beneath and beyond the literal words.



Materials: A short neutral text — a simple description of a room, a list of daily activities, or a few improvised neutral sentences.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Explain that the group will practise translating emotion between voice and body. 2. Distribute or read aloud a short neutral text. If you do not have one, improvise a few calm, factual sentences. 3. In pairs, assign roles: Person A: "text reader" — they speak the text in a neutral, calm tone. Person B: "emotional translator": express the emotion they hear (or imagine) using body language, facial expression, and possibly sounds, without changing the text. 4. Demonstrate briefly: as Person A reads neutrally, Person B might show joy, anxiety, boredom, or curiosity using only the body. 5. Give pairs 2–3 minutes to try one emotion (e.g., happiness), then invite them to switch to a different emotion (for example, worry) with the same text. 6. After a few rounds, ask partners to swap roles so both experience reading and translating. 7. Optionally, in multilingual groups, invite Person A to read the text in their own language while Person B translates the emotion physically..	1. Share the neutral text on screen or paste it into the chat. Read it aloud once in a neutral tone. 2. Explain the same roles: A = reader (neutral tone), B = emotional translator (body and face on camera). 3. Put participants into pairs in breakout rooms. Ask them to decide who will be A and B first. 4. Ery the text with one emotion, then switch to a different emotion, then swap roles. 5. Open breakout rooms for 10–12 minutes. Broadcast prompts at intervals: "Switch emotions now" and "Swap roles now." 6. Bring everyone back to the main room and invite brief reflections on the experience.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may exaggerate emotion to the point of caricature. Encourage them to try more subtle versions too, which often feel more real. • Watch for pairs where the translator's body language seems disconnected from the reader's tone; this is useful debrief material about miscommunication. • Keep the emotional palette simple (joy, curiosity, calm, surprise, mild worry).	• Encourage participants to sit where their face and upper body are clearly visible on camera. • Some readers may start adding emotion to their voice; remind them gently that a neutral read keeps the focus on the translator. • Be aware that emotional expressions can be culturally specific.



Debrief questions

- Did you ever feel that the body and the voice were communicating different emotions?
- How might this exercise help us notice emotional messages in everyday conversation?



Exercise 3.5: Listening Walk



15–20 minutes



Any size



Online / Offline (adapted)



Entry level



Goal: sensory awareness / quiet attention Shift focus from speaking to listening. Help participants notice sounds and small details they usually ignore.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Explain that the group will take a "<i>listening walk</i>": a short, mostly silent walk where the focus is on noticing sounds and small details in the environment. 2. Choose a safe route outside the room (corridor, courtyard, nearby street) or inside the building (corridors, stairwells, different rooms). Check accessibility for all participants in advance. 3. Invite participants to walk in small groups of 3–4, ask them to minimise speaking. They can communicate through pointing, eye contact, or brief phrases if necessary. 4. Give a simple focus prompt, e.g.: "<i>Notice three sounds you would normally ignore.</i>" "<i>Notice one thing that shows people trying to communicate.</i>" 5. Walk for 5–10 minutes. Return to the room and sit in a circle. 6. Ask each small group to briefly share what they noticed (sounds, signs, interactions, small details) .	1. Invite participants to mute their microphones and keep cameras on if possible. 2. Give a simple focus prompt, such as: "<i>Close your eyes if comfortable and notice three different sounds in your environment right now.</i>" "<i>Notice one sound that suggests people are communicating somewhere nearby.</i>" 3. Guide 3–5 minutes of quiet listening. You can offer occasional prompts: "<i>See if you can notice a sound far away... now a sound very close by...</i>" 4. After the listening, invite participants to open their eyes and take a moment to recall what they noticed. 5. In small breakout groups of 3–4, or in the main room, ask each person to share one or two sounds or details they noticed. 6. If using breakout rooms, bring everyone back and invite 3–4 people to share something that stood out.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may continue chatting as usual; gently remind them of the listening focus without drawing attention to them. • Watch for people who become very inward; in the debrief, invite them to share even one small detail. • Be aware of accessibility needs (mobility, sensory sensitivities) and adapt the route, pace, and length accordingly.	• Some participants may be in noisy environments and feel self-conscious. Normalise this: "<i>Whatever is around you today is your soundscape.</i>" • Others may be in very quiet spaces and struggle to find sounds; internal sounds (breathing, small movements) are valid. • In breakout groups, watch for people who say "<i>I didn't notice anything.</i>" Let others share first, then gently return to them.



Debrief questions

- Did you notice anything you would normally have missed?
- What does this exercise suggest about how much we usually hear, and how much we filter out?



Section Debrief Guide

After these exercises, take 10–15 minutes to connect the experience explicitly to listening and dialogue, rather than leaving it at the level of “games.”

Suggested questions:

- Which exercise made you most aware of your own listening?
- Did you discover anything new about how you communicate without words?
- When you think about conversations in your everyday life, what — if anything — would you like to try differently after today?

You can also invite participants to share brief “listening commitments” (for example, “I will try to wait one extra second before responding,” or “I will pay more attention to tone than to exact words”) and write them on a flipchart. This helps bridge the exercises into everyday practice.

Adaptation Notes

For groups with significant language differences: Prioritise Gibberish Conversation, Emotional Translation, and Listening Walk, which rely strongly on non-verbal communication. In Yes, And and Partner Storytelling, allow participants to use any language they share, and keep prompts simple. You can also pair people who share a language for storytelling, then mix pairs differently for debrief.

For groups with low confidence in speaking: Start with Gibberish Conversation and Emotional Translation, where there is less pressure to “say the right thing.” In Partner Storytelling, shorten the story time and emphasise that the story can be very simple. Avoid asking people to share personal stories with the whole group unless they volunteer.

For groups working on intercultural competence: Highlight explicitly how meaning travelled in Gibberish Conversation and Emotional Translation. Ask what this suggests about intercultural contact — for example, how much can be communicated through tone and gesture when vocabulary is limited. Use Listening Walk to focus on real-world signs of communication (posters, symbols, multilingual signage).

For groups that tend to debate or argue: Use Yes, And as a conscious contrast to “Yes, but.” In debrief, invite participants to imagine using “Yes, and” in professional or community settings where they normally push back immediately. Make clear that “Yes, and” is a tool for exploration, not a rule for life.



Photo: Jana Mirina

4. Emotional Awareness and Resilience

Goal: Support learners in working with uncertainty, mistakes, and emotional expression.

Most educational settings ask people to manage their emotions rather than work with them. Feelings of confusion, embarrassment, or frustration are treated as obstacles to learning.

This section takes the opposite view. Emotional awareness is important for learning. Adults who cannot tolerate uncertainty will avoid creative risk. Adults who have learned to associate mistakes with shame will protect themselves before they experiment. Adults who have no practice naming or expressing what they feel will struggle to connect with others across difference. Ritter and Mostert (2022) found that improvisation practice specifically supports emotional flexibility and resilience by building the capacity to stay present with them and move through them.

Somatic approaches are particularly effective in supporting emotional processing, especially for people who have experienced stress or trauma (Kuhfuß et al., 2021). When the body is engaged, emotional material that cannot easily be put into words can still be acknowledged, expressed, and integrated. Mezirow (2000) adds a further dimension: it is often precisely the disorienting experience of not knowing, of feeling uncertain or exposed, that creates the conditions for genuine transformation.

The exercises in this section are designed to make the experience of uncertainty and mistake-making not just tolerable but genuinely enjoyable.



Exercise 4.1: Mistake Celebration



10–15 minutes



8–30 people



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: mistake-positive culture / psychological safety Reframe the relationship to error. Helps participants experience being celebrated for getting things wrong, building the conditions for genuine creative risk.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to stand in a circle. 2. Explain the premise: in this exercise, every mistake is celebrated, not corrected. The group's job is to cheer for mistakes. 3. Demonstrate yourself: make a deliberate mistake — say the wrong word, trip slightly, clap at the wrong moment — then throw your arms in the air and shout "Yes!" or "Brilliant!" Invite the group to join in cheering. 4. Start a simple group activity that is easy to get wrong, such as: a) Clapping a rhythm together and changing it suddenly. b) Going around the circle saying a sequence (days of the week, numbers, colours) and deliberately making errors. 5. Each time someone makes a mistake — or notices they have made one — the whole group cheers, claps, or celebrates together. 6. Run for 5–8 minutes, keeping the energy fast. 7. Optionally, invite participants to make a deliberate mistake in front of the group, celebrate it before the group joins in.	1. Ask participants to turn cameras on and sit where they can be seen clearly. 2. Explain the same premise: every mistake is celebrated. Demonstrate yourself on camera — say the wrong word, make a wrong gesture — then raise your arms and cheer. Invite the group to cheer along. 3. Start a simple sequence activity, such as: a) Going around in gallery order saying the days of the week, deliberately making errors. b) Counting in a sequence and changing direction unexpectedly. 4. Each time someone makes a mistake, the whole group unmutes briefly to cheer, clap, or react visibly on camera. 5. Run for 5–8 minutes. Keep the pace fast and your own energy high. 6. Optionally, invite a volunteer to make a deliberate mistake, celebrate it first, then let the group join in.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants will laugh or look to others for permission to celebrate. Keep your own energy genuinely celebratory; the group will follow. • Watch for anyone who seems distressed rather than amused by their mistakes — this may signal a deeper relationship with failure that deserves a quiet follow-up after the session. • The celebration should always feel warm, not mocking. If the energy tips toward ridicule, redirect it immediately.	• The brief unmuting for cheering can feel chaotic online; this is fine and part of the energy. Let it be noisy. • Watch participants' faces on camera: genuine laughter and relaxation are the signs the exercise is working. • Some participants may keep cameras off out of embarrassment; gently invite them in but do not force it.



Debrief questions

- How did it feel to be cheered for a mistake?
- Did the exercise change anything about how you felt when you made an error?



Exercise 4.2: Emotional Orchestra



15–20 minutes



8–25 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: emotional expression / ensemble awareness Practise expressing and shifting emotions through sound and movement. Builds awareness of how emotion moves through a group and how it can be shaped collectively.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to sit or stand in a semicircle, as if they are an orchestra. You stand in front as the "conductor." 2. Explain the structure: you will point to individuals or sections of the group, and they will express the emotion you name — using only sound and movement, no words. 3. Start with clear, simple emotions: joy, sadness, surprise, calm, excitement. 4. Point to one person or a small group and name an emotion. They express it through sound and movement simultaneously. After a few seconds, shift to another person. 5. Gradually introduce more complex combinations: a) Point to two groups at once, each expressing a different emotion. b) Ask the whole group to shift from one emotion to another on your signal. c) Invite a participant to take over as conductor. 6. End by bringing the whole group to a shared "calm" or "peace" together.	1. Ask participants to turn cameras on and sit where their face and upper body are visible. 2. Explain the same structure: you are the conductor; you will name an emotion and point to individuals or groups on screen; they express it through sound and movement, no words. 3. Start with simple, safe emotions: joy, surprise, calm, excitement. 4. Point to a participant by name or by gesturing toward their tile on screen and name an emotion. They express it for a few seconds, then you shift to someone else. 5. Gradually introduce combinations: a) Name two participants and give each a different emotion simultaneously. b) Ask the whole group to shift emotion together on your signal. c) Invite a participant to take over as conductor. 6. End by guiding the whole group to a shared "calm" together, then a moment of silence.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may feel self-conscious about expressing emotion in front of others. Start with emotions that feel safer (joy, surprise) before moving to sadness or fear. • Watch for participants who make the exercise theatrical—invite them to make the expression smaller and more personal. • Notice which emotions the group finds easy and which feel harder; use it for the debrief.	• Camera framing matters: encourage participants to sit close enough that facial expression is visible. • Some participants may express emotion very minimally on camera. This is valid; do not push for bigger performances. • Watch for participants who seem to be watching rather than expressing; a direct, warm invitation by name can bring them in.



Debrief questions

- Were some emotions easier to express than others? Why do you think that is?
- Did you feel anything in your body when you expressed a particular emotion?
- What does this exercise suggest about the relationship between expressing emotion and feeling it?



Exercise 4.3: Character Walk



15–20 minutes



8–30 people



Offline only¹



Intermediate level



Goal: embodied awareness / identity and posture Explore how the body shapes emotion and identity, understand the relationship between movement and inner state.



Instructions

1. Ask participants to walk freely around the space in their normal way for a moment.
2. Explain that you will call out instructions and they should adjust their walk accordingly, exploring how the body shapes emotion and identity.
3. Begin with physical qualities:
 - a. *"Walk as if the floor is very hot."*
 - b. *"Walk as if you are carrying something very heavy."*
 - c. *"Walk as if you are in a hurry but don't want anyone to notice."*
4. Move gradually toward emotional and social qualities:
 - a. *"Walk as if you own this room."*
 - b. *"Walk as if you are afraid of taking up too much space."*
 - c. *"Walk as if you have just received very good news."*
5. After each instruction, give participants 30–60 seconds to explore before calling the next.
6. Invite participants to notice how the body changes with each instruction.
7. End by inviting everyone to return to their own natural walk, then pause and notice how it feels compared to the beginning.



What to watch for

- Some instructions may resonate more personally than expected. "Walk as if you are afraid of taking up too much space" can be a powerful and emotional experience for participants who feel marginalised in everyday life. Hold space for this without drawing attention to individuals.
- Watch for participants who stay in their heads rather than their bodies — model the physical quality yourself to make it more concrete.



Debrief questions

- Did any instruction feel familiar — like a walk you recognise from your own life?
- How did your body feel at the end compared to the beginning?
- What does this exercise suggest about the relationship between how we carry ourselves and how we feel?

¹ This exercise depends on free movement through physical space. For online groups, use Exercise 4.2 (Emotional Orchestra) as an alternative.



Exercise 4.4: 1–2–3 with Gestures



15–20 minutes



4-12 pairs



Online / Offline



Entry–Intermediate



Goal: non-verbal communication / building without words Move progressively from verbal to non-verbal communication. Shows participants how much can be expressed without language, and builds confidence in non-verbal expression step by step.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to form pairs and stand or sit facing each other. 2. Round 1: In pairs, take turns counting "1, 2, 3" back and forth. Person A says "1," Person B says "2," Person A says "3," Person B says "1," and so on. Run for about one minute until the rhythm is comfortable. 3. Round 2 — Replace one number with a gesture: Explain that "1" will now be replaced by a gesture (a clap, a nod, a tap on the knee). The number is no longer spoken; only the gesture is used. The sequence continues: gesture, "2," "3," gesture, "2," "3." Run for about one minute. 4. Round 3 — Replace a second number: Now "2" is also replaced by a different gesture. The sequence becomes: gesture, gesture, "3." Run for about one minute. 5. Round 4 — Full non-verbal: Replace "3" with a third gesture. The entire sequence is now non-verbal: three different gestures in rhythm.	1. Ask participants to turn cameras on and sit where their hands and face are visible. 2. Explain the same four-round structure. Pairs will work in breakout rooms. 3. Put participants into pairs in breakout rooms and share the round instructions in the chat before opening rooms. Round 1: count "1, 2, 3" back and forth verbally. Round 2: replace "1" with a gesture. Round 3: replace "2" with a second gesture. Round 4: replace "3" with a third gesture — full non-verbal. 4. Open breakout rooms for 10–12 minutes. Broadcast time prompts to move through rounds (e.g. "Move to Round 2 now"). 5. Bring everyone back to the main room. Invite one or two pairs to demonstrate their final non-verbal sequence.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• The transition from verbal to non-verbal is often the point where participants laugh most and feel most alive. This is the exercise working as intended. • Watch for pairs who lose the rhythm and become frustrated; remind them that losing the rhythm is part of the exercise, not a failure. • In the final creative round, some pairs may become very inventive — celebrate this and share examples with the group.	• Screen delay can make rhythm-keeping harder online. Encourage pairs to slow down, especially in the early rounds. • Watch for pairs who rush through rounds without settling into each one. Broadcast reminders help keep everyone at the same pace. • In the final round, some pairs may find the non-verbal sequence surprisingly easy on camera — the visual focus of video calls can actually help.



Debrief questions

- At which point did the exercise feel most challenging? Most enjoyable?
- What changed in your connection with your partner as the words disappeared?
- What does this suggest about how much of communication is actually verbal?



Section Debrief Guide

This section deals with material that can be genuinely moving for some participants. Allow more time for the debrief than you might expect to need — 15 minutes is a minimum.

Suggested questions:

- What did you discover about yourself in these exercises that you did not know before?
- Was there a moment when you felt something shift — in your body, your mood, or your relationship to the group?
- What would it mean to bring more emotional awareness into your everyday work or learning?

If the group is quiet after emotionally intense exercises, do not rush to fill the silence. A minute of shared quiet is itself a form of reflection. You can also invite participants to write or draw briefly before speaking, which lowers the threshold for sharing.

Quick Adaptation Notes

For groups with trauma histories: Exercise caution with Character Walk and the Full Non-Verbal Sequence, which can surface strong emotional material. Make participation optional at every stage. Avoid instructions that evoke fear, threat, or powerlessness unless you know the group well and have appropriate support in place. Mistake Celebration and Emotional Orchestra are generally safer starting points.

For groups with low emotional vocabulary: Use Emotional Orchestra to gently expand the range of emotions participants can name and express. Keep the palette simple at first (happy, sad, surprised, calm) and introduce more nuanced emotions (nervous, proud, confused, hopeful) only once the group is comfortable.

For groups of educators or professionals: Connect the exercises explicitly to their work context. In the debrief for Mistake Celebration, ask how they respond to mistakes in their own classrooms or workplaces. Character Walk can be used to explore different professional roles and the emotional weight they carry.

For groups with physical limitations: Adapt Character Walk and the Full Non-Verbal Sequence to work from a seated position. Most of the emotional and relational content transfers fully to seated movement. Always offer seated alternatives without drawing attention to individuals who need them.



Photo: Jana Mirina

2.5. Creativity, Inclusion and Intercultural Dialogue

Goal: Enable diverse groups to create together across language and cultural barriers.

Creativity is often treated as a talent that some people have and others do not. In this toolkit, it is treated as a practice — something that emerges when the right conditions are in place. For diverse groups, creative collaboration has a particular value: it creates a shared task that does not belong to any one cultural tradition, where no one's way of doing things is automatically correct, and where difference becomes a resource rather than a barrier.

Creative participation is a form of social action: when people who are usually silenced or marginalised take the stage, they are rehearsing a different relationship to power and belonging (Boal, 1979). Arts-based co-creation in diverse groups produces not just creative outputs but new ways of understanding each other (Van Houte and Rast, 2024). Moralli (2024) and Alves Moreira and Jakobi (2021) demonstrate that participatory arts methods are particularly effective in intercultural settings precisely because they bypass the hierarchies of language competence that so often determine who gets to speak and who stays silent.

The three exercises in this section are designed to make that bypass structural. None of them require verbal fluency to participate fully. All of them produce something together — an image, a story, a shared improvisation — that belongs to the group rather than to any individual. And all of them create the conditions for participants to discover, through experience rather than instruction, that their cultural background is not an obstacle to collaboration but one of its most interesting ingredients.



Exercise 5.1: Silent Collaboration



20–25 minutes



8–24 people



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: creative trust / non-verbal co-creation Create something together without speaking. Removes the language hierarchy from the creative process entirely, and shows how much can be built through attention, responsiveness, and shared intention alone.



Materials: Large sheets of paper (A2 or bigger), markers or coloured pens. Online: shared digital whiteboard (Miro, Mural, Jamboard, or equivalent).



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Place large sheets of paper on tables or the floor, with markers or coloured pens available. 2. Explain that for the next 15 minutes, the group will create a collective drawing or visual map together, in silence. No words, no planning in advance. 3. Give a loose prompt to start, such as: "Draw the place where you feel most at home" or "Draw something that represents your journey here." The prompt should be open enough that there is no single correct response. 4. Participants begin drawing simultaneously, on the same sheet or on adjacent sheets they can connect. They may add to each other's drawings, respond to what they see, or create their own contribution alongside others. 5. After 15 minutes, invite everyone to step back and look at what has been made together.	1. Set up a blank shared digital whiteboard in advance and share the link with participants at the start of the exercise. 2. Explain the same premise: the group will create something together, in silence, using the drawing and sticky-note tools on the shared board. No verbal communication during the exercise; only the chat if necessary. 3. Give the same type of open prompt as in the offline version. 4. Participants draw, add images, write single words, or place shapes on the shared board simultaneously for 15 minutes. 5. After 15 minutes, unmute and invite each person to point to one element on the board and say one sentence about it.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants will hesitate, waiting for permission or a clearer instruction. Resist the urge to give more guidance. • Watch for moments when participants begin responding to each other's drawings rather than working in parallel; this is the exercise working as intended. • Be attentive to participants who draw very small or in a corner of the page; this is worth noting for the debrief.	• Some participants may not be familiar with digital whiteboard tools. Spend 2–3 minutes at the start showing the basic functions (draw, text, sticky note). Keep it simple — the exercise does not require technical skill. • Watch for participants who only observe without contributing; send a brief private message inviting them to add anything, even a single mark or word.



Debrief questions

- What did you notice about how the image developed — did it surprise you?
- What does this exercise suggest about what we can create together without planning?



Exercise 5.2: Cultural Object Story



25–30 minutes



6–20 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: intercultural dialogue / personal narrative Share a brief story connected to an object from each participant's own cultural background or personal history. Builds intercultural understanding through the particular and personal rather than through generalisation.



Materials: Ask participants in advance — ideally at the end of the previous session — to bring one small object that means something to them.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Remind participants to have their object ready. If someone has not brought one, invite them to draw or describe one from memory, or to choose any object they can find in the room. 2. Sit in a circle. Explain that each person will have 2–3 minutes to show their object and tell a short story about it. The story can be about what the object is, where it comes from, who gave it to them, or what it means. There is no right or wrong way to tell it. 3. Model it yourself first with your own object. 4. Go around the circle. After each story, invite one or two brief responses from the group: <i>"What stayed with you from that story?"</i> or <i>"Did anything connect to your own experience?"</i> 5. After everyone has shared, invite the group to notice any unexpected connections between the objects and stories.	1. Ask participants in advance to find one small object at home that means something to them and to have it ready to show on camera. If they cannot find one, they can show a photograph on their phone or describe an object from memory. 2. In the session, ask participants to keep cameras on throughout the exercise. 3. Each person holds up or shows their object to the camera and tells their story in 2–3 minutes. 4. After each story, invite one or two brief responses verbally or in the chat. 5. If the group is large, use breakout rooms of 4–5 people for the sharing, then bring the full group back together to share one highlight from each room.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may feel their object is not interesting enough or their story too ordinary. Reassure them that the most everyday objects often carry the most meaning. • Watch for participants who speak very briefly out of shyness, a simple question (<i>"Where did you get it?"</i>) can gently invite more detail. • Be attentive to stories that carry grief or loss; hold space for these without rushing past them.	• Camera quality and lighting vary; some objects may be hard to see. Invite participants to describe the object verbally as well as showing it. • In breakout rooms, assign a note-taker to capture one sentence about each object so that highlights can be shared with the full group.



Debrief questions

- Did any story surprise you — did you learn something about a person or a culture that you did not expect?
- What does it feel like to share something personal in a group of people from different backgrounds?



Exercise 5.3: Open Improvisation Jam



30–40 minutes



8–20 people



Offline only²



Advanced level



Goal: creative co-creation / intercultural expression A loosely structured improvisation session in which participants use movement, sound, image, and language freely and simultaneously, building on each other's contributions without a predetermined outcome. The most open-ended exercise in the toolkit. Requires a group that has already built trust and comfort with improvisation. Best used toward the end of a programme, not at the beginning.



Instructions

1. Clear the room of chairs and tables. Participants should be able to move freely in all directions.
2. Explain the premise: for the next 20–25 minutes, the group will improvise together. There is no script, no assigned roles, and no correct outcome. Participants can use movement, sound, words, objects, or any combination. They can work alone, in pairs, or as a group. The only rule is to stay present and respond to what is happening around them.
3. Offer a loose starting image or theme to open the space, such as: "We are all arriving somewhere new" or "Something is about to change." The theme should be evocative but not prescriptive.
4. Begin with one minute of silence — everyone standing still, breathing, noticing the room. Then invite the first movement or sound from whoever feels ready.
5. Let the improvisation develop without intervention for 15–20 minutes. Your role as facilitator is to observe, not to direct. Only step in if the energy completely collapses or if something requires a safety response.
6. Close the jam with a clear signal (a bell, a raised hand, a spoken "and... pause"). Invite the group to find stillness together, then sit down.



Online adaptation

A full Open Improvisation Jam cannot be replicated online, but a partial version is possible:

1. Each participant finds a space at home where they can move freely, away from their desk.
2. Use a shared music playlist (played through one participant's screen share) as a common backdrop.
3. Participants take turns — 90 seconds each — improvising in front of their camera: movement, sound, a short spoken image, or a combination. The rest of the group watches in silence and responds in the chat with one word after each turn.
4. In the final round, invite everyone to improvise simultaneously for 60 seconds, cameras on, sound muted.

² This exercise relies on shared physical space, spontaneous physical interaction, and real-time group dynamics. A partial online adaptation is described below.



This version is significantly less immersive than the offline format, but it preserves the core experience of spontaneous creative expression in front of others.

What to watch for

Offline	Online adaptation
• The beginning is almost always awkward. This is normal and important; do not rescue the group too quickly. • Watch for the moment when genuine co-creation begins: participants responding to each other rather than performing independently. • Some participants may become very active while others observe; normalize both. • Watch for anyone who seems distressed and check in after the exercise.	• Some participants will feel self-conscious improvising alone in front of a camera. Keep individual turns short and frame them as sketches rather than performances. • The simultaneous final round is often the most liberating moment — encourage participants to go as far as they feel comfortable.

Debrief questions

- Was there a moment during the jam when you felt genuinely connected to what someone else was doing?
- Did your cultural background or personal history show up in what you created? How?
- What surprised you — in yourself or in the group?



Section Debrief Guide

After completing the exercises in this section, take 10–15 minutes for a group reflection that connects the creative experience to the theme of intercultural dialogue.

Suggested questions:

- Looking back at what we made together today — what do you notice about how different backgrounds and experiences shaped it?
- Was there a moment when difference felt like a problem? Was there a moment when it felt like a gift?
- What would it mean to bring this way of creating together into other parts of your life or work?

If the group has produced a visual artefact (from Silent Collaboration), keep it visible during the debrief. Physical evidence of shared creation is a powerful anchor for reflection.

Quick Adaptation Notes

For groups with very mixed digital literacy (online sessions): Prioritise Cultural Object Story, which requires only a camera and an object. Silent Collaboration on a digital whiteboard requires a brief technical introduction but is accessible once participants understand the basic tools. The Open Improvisation Jam online adaptation is best reserved for groups who have already met several times online and are comfortable on camera.

For groups where some participants are reluctant to share personal material: In Cultural Object Story, make it explicit that the object does not need to be deeply personal — a favourite cup or a familiar tool is entirely sufficient. The exercise works at whatever level of intimacy participants choose.

For groups with recent or ongoing trauma related to displacement: The prompt *"Draw the place where you feel most at home"* in Silent Collaboration may be painful for participants who do not have a stable home. Offer an alternative: *"Draw something that makes you feel calm"* or *"Draw something you are looking forward to."* Similarly, in Cultural Object Story, avoid framing the object as something from "back home" — use "something that means something to you" instead.

For groups of educators using this toolkit professionally: The Open Improvisation Jam is particularly valuable as a professional development experience. After the debrief, invite educators to reflect on what this exercise would require of them as facilitators — specifically, the capacity to hold space without directing — and how that relates to their existing practice.



Photo: Jana Mirina

2.6. Civic Voice and Self-Expression

Goal: Help learners find and use their voice on social and civic themes.

Finding one's voice — the capacity to speak from one's own experience, to name what matters, to participate in public life — is both a personal and a political act. For adults who have been marginalised by migration, poverty, or exclusion, the distance between private experience and public expression can feel very large. Many have learned, through repeated experience, that their opinions are not expected, not welcome, or not worth the risk of stating.

This section responds directly to the project's civic engagement objective and to the Erasmus+ priority on common values and participation. It draws on Freire's (1970) foundational argument that education is never neutral: it either domesticates people — training them to accept the world as it is — or it liberates them, by helping them name their experience and imagine alternatives. Boal (1979) translated this insight into theatre practice, developing Forum Theatre as a method in which participants do not just watch a scene about a social problem but intervene in it, trying out different responses and discovering through the body what might be possible. McIvor (2019) extends this tradition to contemporary civic education, showing that arts-based approaches are particularly effective at engaging adults who have been excluded from conventional forms of political participation.

The exercises in this section do not require participants to hold particular political views. They require only that participants have experiences and that they are willing to connect those experiences to questions about the world they share.



Exercise 6.1: Story of a Change



25–30 minutes



6–20 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: civic narrative / personal voice Connect personal experience to social themes by telling a short story about a moment when something changed. Builds the habit of speaking from one's own perspective rather than in generalities.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to sit comfortably, either in a circle or in pairs facing each other. 2. Introduce the prompt: "<i>Think of a moment when something changed — in your life, in your neighbourhood, in your country, or in the world. It can be a big change or a small one. It can be something you caused, something that happened to you, or something you simply witnessed.</i>" 3. Give participants 3–4 minutes of silent thinking time. 4. In pairs, each person tells their story to their partner in 3 minutes. The listener's only job is to listen — no advice, no questions, no interruptions. 5. After both partners have shared, invite each pair to identify one thing their two stories had in common. 6. Bring the group back together. Invite each pair to share their common thread in one sentence. 7. Open a brief whole-group reflection on what themes emerged across the stories.	1. Use the same prompt and thinking time as in the offline version. Share the prompt on screen or in the chat so participants can refer back to it. 2. Send participants into breakout rooms of two for the paired sharing (3 minutes each direction). 3. Bring the full group back and ask each pair to share their common thread in the chat or verbally. 4. Facilitate a brief whole-group reflection on the themes that emerged.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants may choose very small or personal changes rather than social or civic ones. This is entirely valid — the exercise works at whatever scale feels safe. Do not steer participants toward "bigger" topics. • Watch for participants who struggle to think of a story. Offer additional prompts if needed: "A time when a rule changed," "A time when someone stood up for something," "A time when you saw something that felt unfair."	• In breakout rooms, some participants may feel uncomfortable with the silence of a one-to-one online conversation. Reassure them in advance that pauses are fine and that the listener does not need to respond during the story. • If a participant is alone in a breakout room due to an odd number, join them yourself or create a group of three.



Debrief questions

- What did it feel like to tell your story out loud to another person?
- Did you notice any connections between your story and others in the room?
- What does it mean that all of us have stories of change — even if we rarely share them?



Exercise 6.2: Forum Scene



35–45 minutes



8–20 people



Offline only³



Advanced level



Goal: civic agency / collective problem-solving A simplified version of Boal's Forum Theatre. A short scene depicting a recognisable social difficulty is performed, then replayed with participants invited to intervene and try alternative responses. Practises the experience of agency in situations that usually feel fixed. Requires a group with sufficient trust and comfort with role-play.



Instructions

1. Explain the structure in advance: a short scene will be performed showing a moment of difficulty or injustice — something recognisable from everyday life. Participants will watch it once, then be invited to intervene and change what happens.
2. Prepare a short scene (3–5 minutes) in advance with one or two co-facilitators or willing participants. The scene should depict a situation relevant to the group — for example: a person being dismissed in a meeting because of their accent; someone being told they do not qualify for a service they need; a group making a decision that excludes one member. The scene should end at the moment of difficulty, not after it is resolved.
3. Perform the scene once without interruption. Ask participants to watch and notice: "What is happening here? Who has power? Who does not?"
4. Perform the scene a second time. This time, any participant can call "Stop!" at any moment, step into the scene, replace the protagonist, and try a different response. The other actors continue from that point, responding realistically to whatever the intervening participant does.
5. After each intervention, briefly discuss with the group: "What changed? Did it help? What else might be possible?"
6. Run as many interventions as time and energy allow — typically 3–5.
7. Close with a whole-group reflection, not on the scene but on the experience of intervening.



Online adaptation

A full Forum Scene is not possible online, but the following structure preserves its core intention:

1. Share a short written scenario (one paragraph) describing a moment of difficulty — the same type of situation as in the offline version.
2. Ask participants to read it and respond in the chat: "What would you do if you were the protagonist?"
3. Collect 3–4 responses and discuss each one briefly: "What would happen next? What might change? What might not?"

³ This exercise depends on physical presence, spontaneous intervention, and the energy of a shared room. A partial online adaptation is described below.



4. Invite participants to write their own brief alternative ending to the scenario in 2–3 sentences, then share in pairs via breakout rooms.
5. Bring the group back together and reflect on the range of responses.

This version shifts from embodied intervention to narrative intervention, which is less immediate but still practises the core skill of imagining agency in difficult situations.



What to watch for

Offline	Online adaptation
• The scene must be recognisable but not so close to any one participant's specific experience that it feels exposing. Avoid scenes that could be read as depicting a real person in the room. • Watch for participants who intervene aggressively or who try to "win" the scene. Remind the group that the goal is not to find the perfect solution but to discover what is possible. • Be prepared for strong emotional responses; the exercise can surface real experiences of injustice.	• Keep the written scenario short and clear. Avoid scenarios that are so specific they feel like a test with a right answer. • The goal is to generate multiple possible responses, not consensus.



Debrief questions

- What did it feel like to step into the scene and try something different? (*offline*) / What did it feel like to imagine yourself in that situation? (*online*)
- Did any of the interventions surprise you — did something work that you did not expect?
- What does this exercise suggest about the difference between watching a difficult situation and acting in it?



Exercise 6.3: What I Want to Say



25–25 minutes



6–25 people



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: self-expression / civic voice Each participant prepares and delivers one short statement — something they genuinely want to say, to anyone or to no one in particular. A quiet but powerful exercise in finding and using one's voice.



Materials: Small pieces of paper and pens (offline). Chat function or document (online).



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Give each participant a small piece of paper and a pen. 2. Explain the task: <i>"Write one thing you want to say. It can be addressed to a person, a group, a system, or the world. It can be a wish, a complaint, a question, a declaration, or something you have never said out loud before. It should be true, and it should be yours."</i> 3. Give 5 minutes of quiet writing time. 4. Invite participants to stand, one at a time, and read their statement aloud to the group. They do not need to explain it or discuss it. They simply say it, clearly, and sit down. 5. After each statement, the group receives it in silence — no applause, no comment, just a moment of acknowledgement. 6. After everyone who wishes to has spoken, hold a brief silence before moving to the debrief. 7. Participation is optional.	1. Use the same prompt and writing time as in the offline version. Share the prompt on screen or in the chat. 2. Invite participants to read their statement aloud to the camera, one at a time. Ask everyone else to keep their microphone muted and their camera on while listening. 3. After each statement, hold 5 seconds of silence before the next person speaks. 4. Alternatively, invite participants to type their statement into the chat and post it simultaneously on your signal. Read a selection aloud yourself, slowly, with pauses between each one. 5. Close with a moment of shared silence — ask everyone to stay on camera, unmuted, for 30 seconds without speaking.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
• Some participants will write something very brief or very safe. Others may write something unexpectedly raw or moving. Hold space for both. • The silence after each statement is important — resist the urge to fill it. • Watch for participants who become emotional; be present with them without drawing the group's attention.	• The simultaneous chat version can be very powerful — seeing many statements appear at once creates a sense of collective voice. It requires participants to be comfortable with their words being visible to the whole group. Participants can write something brief. • Some participants may type their statement and then delete it before posting. Normalise hesitation: "Whatever you write is enough."



Debrief questions

- What was it like to say your statement out loud — or to write it and know others would read it?
- Did hearing others' statements change anything for you?
- What does it mean to have a voice — and what gets in the way of using it?



Section Debrief Guide

This section deals with material that is more explicitly social and political than earlier sections. Allow time for the debrief to breathe — 15 minutes minimum — and be prepared for the conversation to go in directions you did not anticipate.

Suggested questions:

- What did you discover about your own voice today — what it sounds like, what it wants to say?
- Was there a moment when you felt the connection between your personal experience and something larger — a social issue, a shared problem, a common hope?
- What would it take to use your voice in this way outside this room?

Close the section by acknowledging explicitly what the group has done: they have practised something that many people never get the chance to practise. That is worth naming.

Quick Adaptation Notes

For groups with limited civic vocabulary or low confidence in political topics: Begin with Story of a Change and keep the framing personal rather than political. The civic dimension will emerge naturally from the stories without needing to be named in advance. What I Want to Say works well as a closing exercise even if Forum Scene is not used.

For groups with strong political divisions or inter-community tensions: Use Forum Scene with care. Choose scenarios that are clearly fictional and do not map onto real divisions within the group. If tensions are high, replace Forum Scene with a second round of Story of a Change, focusing specifically on stories of solidarity or unexpected help.

For groups of migrants or refugees navigating asylum or integration processes: What I Want to Say can be a particularly powerful exercise for people who are rarely asked what they think or what they need. Be prepared for statements that are addressed to governments, institutions, or systems. Receive these without deflecting or reassuring — the exercise is not about finding solutions but about being heard.

For online groups with low camera confidence: In What I Want to Say, offer the simultaneous chat option as the primary format rather than the spoken version. It is lower-threshold and can still produce a strong collective effect.



Photo: Jana Mirina

2.7. Closing and Reflection

Goal: Help participants integrate the experience and leave with something concrete.

How a session ends matters as much as how it begins. The closing is the moment when experience becomes learning, is named, integrated, and carried forward into the rest of life.

Experience alone does not produce learning: it is the deliberate act of returning to experience, noticing what it meant, and connecting it to what one already knows that transforms activity into understanding (Boud et al., 1985).

For vulnerable adult learners, the closing carries an additional weight. Many have left educational settings without ever being asked what they thought, what they felt, or what they are taking away. Being asked those questions — and being given time and structure to answer them — is itself a form of recognition. It communicates that their inner experience of the session is as important as any observable outcome. That is not a small thing.

The three exercises in this section are designed for different moments and different groups. One Word Round is fast, inclusive, and works at any point in a programme. Letter to Myself is more reflective and personal, best suited to the end of a longer programme or a particularly significant session. Appreciation Circle is relational, closing the group's time together by making visible what participants have given each other. All three can be used independently or combined.



Exercise 2.7.1: One Word Round



5–10 minutes



Any size



Online / Offline



Entry level



Goal: reflection / closing Each participant offers one word that captures something about their experience of the session. Fast, inclusive, and low-threshold. Works as a closing ritual for any session, regardless of what preceded it. Particularly valuable for groups with language barriers, as it requires only a single word — in any language.



Instructions

1. Ask participants to sit or stand in a circle.
2. Explain the task: *"We are going to close with one word each. The word can describe how you feel right now, something you are taking away, something that surprised you, or anything else from today. There is no right answer. One word, in any language."*
3. Give participants 30 seconds of quiet thinking time.
4. Go around the circle. Each person says their word. No explanation is needed unless they want to give one.
5. After everyone has spoken, hold a brief moment of silence before formally closing the session.
6. Optional: write all the words on a flipchart as they are spoken, so the group can see the collective vocabulary of the session at the end.



What to watch for

Some participants will offer more than one word, or a short phrase. Let this happen — the instruction is a guide, not a rule. Watch for words that are unexpectedly strong or that seem to carry more than they say; you can gently invite the person to say a little more if they wish, but do not press. If the group is large, you can do the round in smaller clusters rather than the full circle.



Exercise 2.7.2: Letter to Myself



20-25 minutes



Any size



Online / Offline



Intermediate level



Goal: integration / personal commitment Each participant writes a short letter to themselves — to be read at a later date — reflecting on what they experienced, what they discovered, and what they want to remember or try. Bridges the learning space and everyday life. Creates a concrete, personal artefact that participants take away.



Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Give each participant paper and a pen. Envelopes are optional but add a sense of occasion. 2. Explain the task: <i>"You are going to write a short letter to yourself — to be read in a few weeks or months. Write to yourself as you are right now, at the end of this session. You might write about what you experienced today, something you discovered about yourself, something you want to try, or something you want to remember when things feel difficult."</i> 3. Give 10–12 minutes of quiet writing time. Play soft background music if it helps. 4. Participants seal their letters if envelopes are available. Offer two options: take the letter home and open it on a date they choose, or leave it with you and you will return it to them at the end of the programme. 5. Do not ask participants to share what they wrote unless they volunteer. The letter is private. 6. Close with a brief verbal acknowledgement: <i>"Whatever you wrote, you wrote it for yourself. That matters."</i>	1. Ask participants to find paper and a pen, or to open a private document on their device. 2. Use the same prompt and writing time as in the offline version. 3. Ask participants to keep their cameras off during the writing time to create a sense of privacy. 4. After the writing time, invite cameras back on. Ask participants simply: <i>"Do you have your letter?"</i> — a small ritual of acknowledgement without requiring anyone to share content. 5. If using a learning management system or shared platform, you can offer a private digital journal option as an alternative to a physical letter.



What to watch for

Offline	Online
Some participants may struggle to write — either because of language barriers or because the reflective mode is unfamiliar. Offer alternative prompts if needed: <i>"Write three things you noticed today," "Write one question you are leaving with," "Write one sentence that begins: Today I discovered..."</i> For participants who find writing difficult, drawing is equally valid. Be attentive to participants who become very absorbed or emotional during the writing; give them space and do not rush the time..	The absence of a physical envelope reduces the sense of ritual slightly. You can compensate by being deliberate about the moment of closing: ask participants to fold their paper or close their document before cameras come back on, marking the transition from private writing to shared space.



Exercise 2.7.3: Appreciation Circle

15–20 minutes | 6–20 | Intermediate

15–20 minutes 6–20 people Online / Offline Intermediate level

Goal: connection / closing / recognition Participants offer brief, specific appreciations to each other — naming something they noticed, valued, or were moved by in another person during the programme. Closes the group's time together by making visible the impact participants have had on each other. Builds a sense of collective achievement and mutual recognition that extends beyond the facilitator's acknowledgement alone.

Instructions

Offline	Online
1. Ask participants to sit in a circle. 2. Explain the structure: <i>"We are going to close by appreciating each other. An appreciation is something specific and true — something you noticed about a person, something they did or said that stayed with you, something you are grateful for. It is not a compliment about how someone looks or a general 'you were great.' It is something real."</i> 3. Model it yourself first, offering a specific appreciation to one participant: <i>"I want to appreciate [name] for the moment when they tried something they were nervous about. It changed the energy in the room."</i> 4. Invite participants to offer appreciations whenever they feel ready. Each appreciation is addressed directly to the person: <i>"I want to appreciate you for..."</i> 5. Allow 10–12 minutes. Not everyone needs to speak, and not everyone needs to receive an appreciation aloud — but ensure no one is overlooked. 6. Close with a brief whole-group acknowledgement: <i>"Everything that happened in this room happened because of all of you."</i>	1. Use the same structure and prompt as in the offline version. 2. Ask participants to keep their cameras on throughout. 3. Appreciations can be offered verbally or in the chat. If using chat, ask participants to address the appreciation directly: <i>"[Name], I want to appreciate you for..."</i> 4. Read chat appreciations aloud as they appear, so they are heard by the whole group and not just seen. 5. Close with cameras on and a moment of shared silence before formally ending the session.

What to watch for

Offline	Online
Some participants may offer very general appreciations ("you were so nice"). Model specificity: <i>"Can you say what specifically you noticed?"</i> Watch for participants who minimise appreciations directed at them — this worth noting: <i>"Can you just receive that for a moment?"</i> Appreciation Circle often produces genuine warmth and sometimes tears. Hold the space for both.	In online settings, the chat can move quickly and appreciations may get lost. Slow the pace deliberately — after each verbal appreciation, pause before inviting the next. If using chat only, scroll back at the end and read any that were missed.



Section Debrief Guide

The closing section does not require a separate debrief in the conventional sense — the exercises are themselves reflective. However, if you have time and the group has energy for it, one final question can serve as a bridge between the programme and what comes next:

"If you were to describe this experience to someone who was not here — someone who asked you what you did and why it mattered — what would you say?"

This question asks participants to articulate the value of what they have done in their own words, which is both a reflective act and a rehearsal for carrying the experience forward.

Quick Adaptation Notes

For groups with limited writing ability or language barriers: Replace Letter to Myself with a drawing — participants draw one image that represents something from the session, seal it in an envelope, and take it home. The intention is identical; the medium is more accessible. One Word Round can be done in any language; encourage participants to offer their word in their mother tongue if they wish, and invite a brief translation or gesture if others are curious.

For groups that have met only once: Appreciation Circle works best after multiple sessions, when participants have genuinely observed each other over time. For a single session, replace it with One Word Round or a brief paired sharing: *"Tell your partner one thing you noticed about them today."*

For groups with high emotional intensity: If the session has been particularly demanding — emotionally or physically — prioritise One Word Round over the other two exercises. It is the lightest closing, and sometimes the most powerful. Give people permission to offer a word that is simply honest: *tired, grateful, confused, full* are all valid.

For online groups at the end of a long programme: Letter to Myself translates particularly well to online settings because participants are already at home, already in their private space. The transition from the shared screen to a private letter can feel natural and meaningful. Consider sending the letter prompt by email after the session, giving participants time to write it in their own space and time.



Photo: Jana Mirina

PART THREE — FACILITATION GUIDE

This part is written for educators who are new to improvisation-based methods. It does not assume prior experience with theatre, drama, or group facilitation beyond what most educators already have. Its purpose is practical: to help you run sessions with confidence, adapt when things do not go as planned, and reflect on your own practice in a way that makes you better over time.



How to Facilitate Improvisation

Facilitating improvisation is different from teaching in the conventional sense. You are not delivering content. You are creating conditions — for safety, for play, for risk, for connection — and then stepping back far enough to let the group do the work. This requires a particular kind of attention: less focused on what you are saying and more focused on what is happening in the room.

The guidance below is organised around the moments and challenges that arise most often for educators new to this approach.

Give instructions clearly and briefly. The most common mistake new facilitators make is over-explaining. When people are about to do something physical and social, long verbal instructions create anxiety rather than clarity. By the time you have finished explaining, participants have forgotten the beginning and are too self-conscious to ask.

The rule is: say less than you think you need to, then start. You can add detail once the exercise is already moving. A useful structure is:

1. **What** — one sentence on what participants will do.
2. **How** — one or two sentences on the basic mechanics.
3. **Start** — a clear invitation to begin.

Everything else can wait for the debrief, or can be added as a brief instruction mid-exercise if genuinely needed. Resist the urge to explain why the exercise works before participants have tried it. The experience will do that work more effectively than any explanation (Sawyer, 2021).

Model rather than explain. If you can show it, show it. A demonstration of thirty seconds is worth three minutes of verbal instruction. This is especially true for exercises involving movement, sound, or non-verbal communication, where words are a poor substitute for the thing itself.

Model the exercise yourself before asking participants to try it. Be willing to look slightly awkward or uncertain when you demonstrate — this is not a weakness. It communicates that imperfect participation is welcome, and it lowers the threshold for everyone who follows you (Dudeck & McClure, 2018).

When modelling, keep it simple. Your demonstration is not a performance. It is a permission slip.

Debrief effectively. The debrief is where experience becomes learning. Without it, an improvisation exercise is just a game. With it, the same exercise can open a conversation about trust, communication, power, identity, or resilience that participants carry with them long after the session ends.

A reliable debrief structure moves through four questions in sequence:



What happened? — Descriptive. Ask participants to say what they observed, without interpretation. *"What did you notice during that exercise?"* This grounds the conversation in shared experience rather than individual opinion.

What did you notice? — Reflective. Ask participants to name what they felt, thought, or became aware of. *"Was there a moment that stood out for you? What did it bring up?"* This is where personal meaning begins to emerge.

What does it mean? — Interpretive. Ask participants to connect their experience to something larger — a pattern, a principle, a question about the world. *"What does this suggest about how we communicate? About what trust requires? About what gets in the way of participation?"* This is where the exercise connects to the section's learning goals.

What will you do? — Transfer. Ask participants to identify something concrete they want to try, remember, or change. *"Is there anything from today that you want to carry into your work, your relationships, your everyday life?"* This is optional and should never be pressured — but when it arises naturally, it is the most durable form of learning (Boud et al., 1985).

Not every debrief needs all four questions. A short session may only reach the first two. A longer or more intensive session may move through all four. Read the group's energy and stop when the conversation has found its natural resting point. Silence after a debrief question is not failure — it is often the sign that something real has been touched.

Manage resistance. Resistance — *"I don't want to do this," "This is childish," "I'm not an actor"* — is one of the most common challenges for facilitators new to improvisation. It is also one of the most informative. Resistance is almost never really about the exercise. It is about something the exercise is asking of the person: to be seen, to not know the answer, to look silly, to trust strangers.

Several responses are useful, depending on the type and intensity of resistance:

Name it without making it a problem. *"It's completely normal to feel awkward at the beginning. Most people do. Let's try it and see what happens."* This normalises the feeling without dismissing it.

Make participation genuinely optional. *"You can watch and join when you feel ready."* A participant who watches carefully is still learning, and they will often join once they see that the exercise is safe. Never force participation — it destroys the psychological safety the whole session depends on (Edmondson, 2019).

Connect the exercise to something the group already cares about. For sceptical professionals, naming the transferable skill — listening, co-creation, managing uncertainty — before the exercise can reduce resistance. *"This exercise looks simple. What it trains is the same skill you need when a conversation goes in an unexpected direction."*

Let the exercise speak for itself. If one or two participants engage genuinely, others will often follow. Your most important tool against resistance is not argument — it is the visible enjoyment of the people who are already playing (Brookfield, 2013).



Adapt for quiet, withdrawn, or anxious groups. Some groups will not warm up quickly. They may sit in silence, avoid eye contact, give minimal responses, or seem to be waiting for something to go wrong. This is not a sign that the approach is failing. It is a sign that the group needs more time, more safety, and a lower threshold for participation.

Practical adjustments:

- **Slow down.** Give more time between instructions. Pause longer after asking a question. Silence is not dead air — it is thinking time.
- **Start smaller.** Use the most minimal exercises first: One Word Round, Introduction with Gestures, Collective Counting. Do not move to exercises that require physical contact, sustained eye contact, or personal disclosure until the group has had several smaller successes.
- **Work in pairs before the full group.** Pair work is significantly less exposing than whole-group participation. Use it as a stepping stone.
- **Lower the stakes explicitly.** *"There is nothing to get right here. Whatever you do is the exercise."*
- **Be comfortable with incompleteness.** Not every exercise needs to be finished. If the energy is not there, stop, debrief briefly, and move on. A short, honest debrief about why something felt difficult is often more valuable than pushing through to the end.

Avoid chaos without killing energy. High-energy groups present the opposite challenge: too much noise, too much movement, too many simultaneous conversations, not enough listening. The facilitator's job is not to suppress this energy but to channel it.

Practical adjustments:

- Use focus exercises to reset. Collective Counting, Group Rhythm, and One Word Round all require attention and quiet. Use them when the group needs to come back to centre.
- Give very clear, brief instructions and start immediately. Long explanations create the gap in which chaos grows. Move quickly from instruction to action.
- Use your body, not your voice. Raising your voice to compete with a noisy group rarely works. Standing still, making eye contact, and waiting quietly is often more effective.
- Name what you observe without judgment. *"I notice we have a lot of energy right now. Let's use it."* This acknowledges the group's state and redirects it rather than opposing it.
- Build in physical release before exercises that require stillness. If the group is very energetic, run a short movement exercise before asking for focused attention.

Balance playfulness and safety. Playfulness and safety are not opposites — but they can feel that way when a group is not yet ready to play. The facilitator's task is to hold both simultaneously: to keep the energy light and the stakes low, while also ensuring that no one is humiliated, exposed, or left behind.

In practice, this means:



- **Laugh with the group, not at individuals.** If something funny happens, enjoy it — but be attentive to whether the person at the centre of the laughter is also laughing.
- **Protect quiet participants actively.** If an exercise is generating a lot of energy around a few dominant participants, find ways to draw others in — through direct invitation, through pair work, through exercises that structurally require everyone to contribute.
- **Take emotional moments seriously.** If a participant becomes upset, slow down. You do not need to stop the session, but you do need to acknowledge what is happening. A brief check-in after the session is often more appropriate than a public intervention.
- **Know when to stop.** If an exercise is clearly not working — if the group is disengaged, distressed, or simply not ready — stop it cleanly and move on. This is not failure. It is responsive facilitation (Sawyer, 2021).

Common facilitator mistakes — and how to recover

- **Over-explaining before the exercise.** Recovery: stop mid-explanation, say *"Let's just try it,"* and start. The group will forgive you immediately.
- **Filling every silence.** Recovery: count to ten silently before speaking. Most silences resolve themselves if you wait.
- **Choosing an exercise that is too advanced for the group's current trust level.** Recovery: stop the exercise, name what you observe (*"I think we might need a bit more warm-up first"*), and return to something simpler. Transparency about your own facilitation choices builds trust rather than undermining it.
- **Losing track of time and running out of space for the debrief.** Recovery: even two minutes of debrief is better than none. Ask one question only: *"One word for what you are leaving with."*
- **Reacting defensively to resistance or criticism.** Recovery: thank the person for naming it. *"That's useful to hear. Let's talk about it."* Brookfield (2013) argues that the most powerful thing a facilitator can do in the face of critical feedback is to receive it openly — it models exactly the kind of learning the exercises are designed to practise.

Planning a Session: Templates and Tips

Sample 60-minute session

Time	Phase	Activity
0–5 min	Arrival and settling	Welcome, brief framing of the session's focus.
5–15 min	Opening exercise	One entry-level exercise from Section 2.1 or 2.2.
15–35 min	Core exercise	One intermediate exercise from the target section.
35–50 min	Second core exercise or extension	A second exercise, or a deeper round of the first.
50–60 min	Closing exercise	One Word Round or brief paired reflection. Brief



		facilitator acknowledgement.
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A 60-minute session should contain no more than two or three exercises. Depth is more valuable than variety.

Sample 90-minute session

Time	Phase	Activity
0–5 min	Arrival and settling	Welcome, brief framing.
5–20 min	Opening sequence	Two entry-level exercises from Section 2.1 or 2.2.
20–45 min	Core exercise	One intermediate or advanced exercise with full debrief.
45–65 min	Second core exercise	A second exercise from the same or adjacent section.
65–80 min	Reflection exercise	Letter to Myself, Appreciation Circle, or Story of a Change.
80–90 min	Closing	One Word Round. Close Brief facilitator acknowledgement

A 90-minute session can carry one advanced exercise if the group is ready, but should still prioritise debrief time over exercise quantity.

How to sequence exercises across a multi-session programme. A multi-session programme should follow the arc of Part Two: safety first, then trust, then listening, then emotional depth, then creativity, then civic voice, then reflection. Do not jump to advanced exercises before the group has built the foundation they require.

Practical principles:

- Always open a new session with an entry-level exercise, even if the group has met before. People arrive carrying the weight of their day. A brief warm-up reactivates the group's shared language before moving into more demanding work.
- Return to exercises that worked. Repeating a familiar exercise in a later session often produces a richer experience than the first time, because the group brings more trust and more skill to it.
- Leave at least 15 minutes for closing and reflection in every session, regardless of how much you wanted to cover. The reflection is not optional.
- Track what you use. Keep a simple log of which exercises you ran, what worked, what did not, and what the group seemed ready for next. This is the foundation of responsive programme design.

Principles for mixing sections



- Do not mix opening and advanced exercises in the same session unless the group is well-established and you have explicitly re-contracted the safety agreement.
- Sections 2.3 (Listening) and 2.5 (Creativity) pair well — both work across language difference and can be combined in a single session for multilingual groups.
- Section 2.6 (Civic Voice) should never be the first section used with a new group. It requires the foundation of safety, trust, and emotional awareness built in earlier sections.
- Section 2.7 (Closing) exercises can be used at the end of any session, not only at the end of the programme. One Word Round in particular is a reliable closing ritual that can become a session-to-session anchor.

Evaluating Your Session

Evaluation in this context is not about measuring outcomes against predetermined targets. It is about developing the kind of reflective practice that makes you a better facilitator over time — what Schön (1983) calls the capacity to learn from your own experience rather than simply accumulating it.

What to observe during the session

Facilitation and observation happen simultaneously, which is demanding. It helps to have a small number of specific things to watch for, rather than trying to notice everything.

Participation patterns: Who speaks, who moves, who initiates, who holds back. Are the same people always active? Are the same people always quiet? Does this change across exercises?

Energy shifts: When does the group's energy rise? When does it drop? What caused the shift? Was it an instruction, a moment of connection, a particular exercise, or something in the room?

Moments of genuine contact: When do participants seem to be really with each other — not performing, not waiting for their turn, but actually present? These moments are the evidence that the approach is working.

Your own responses: Notice when you feel anxious, when you rush, when you over-explain, when you feel the urge to rescue a silence or fix a difficulty. Your own reactions are data about what is happening in the room.

Simple self-reflection questions for the facilitator

After each session, take five to ten minutes to write brief responses to the following questions. You do not need to answer all of them every time — choose the two or three that feel most relevant.

- What was the moment in this session when the group felt most alive? What made it possible?
- What was the moment I felt least confident? What was I responding to?
- Was there a participant I lost track of? What might they have needed?



- Did I give instructions too long, too short, or about right?
- Did I leave enough time for the debrief? What would I do differently?
- What would I keep exactly as it was?
- What will I change next time?

These questions are adapted from Brookfield's (2013) critical incident questionnaire, applied to facilitation practice rather than teaching.

How to gather participant feedback informally

Formal evaluation instruments — questionnaires, rubrics, competency frameworks — are rarely the right tool for improvisation-based sessions. They impose a vocabulary that does not fit the experience, and they signal to participants that the session was really about measurement rather than learning.

More useful approaches:

Exit slips: At the end of a session, ask participants to write (or draw) two things on a small piece of paper: one thing they are taking away, and one question they are leaving with. Collect them anonymously. Read them before the next session.

One Word Round as data: The words participants choose in a closing round are genuine feedback. Keep a note of them. Patterns across sessions — recurring words like *safe*, *surprised*, *tired*, *connected*, *confused* — tell you something real about the group's experience.

Brief check-ins at the start of subsequent sessions: *"Last time we did X. How is it sitting with you now, a week later?"* This kind of delayed reflection often surfaces learning that was not visible immediately after the session.

Direct conversation: The most reliable feedback is a brief, informal conversation with one or two participants after the session — not a structured interview, just a genuine question: *"How was that for you today?"* Listen without defending your choices.

Linking observation back to the four principles

Part One of this toolkit described four principles that underpin the approach: psychological safety, embodied learning, dialogical participation, and creative risk-taking. Your session evaluation should periodically return to these principles as a reference point.

Ask yourself:

- **Safety:** Did participants feel safe enough to try things? Were there moments when safety was threatened — and how did I respond?
- **Embodied learning:** Did participants engage through their bodies as well as their minds? Were there moments when physical engagement produced something that words could not?
- **Dialogical participation:** Did participants speak with each other, or mostly to me? Were there genuine exchanges — moments of real listening and real response?



- **Creative risk:** Did anyone try something they would not normally try? Did the session create conditions for genuine surprise?

If the answer to most of these questions is yes, the session worked — regardless of whether it went according to plan. If the answer to most of them is no, the next session needs a different opening, a lower threshold, or more time in the earlier sections of Part Two.

Practical guidance for educators new to improv:

- How to give instructions clearly and briefly
- How to model rather than explain
- How to debrief effectively: *what happened* → *what did you notice* → *what does it mean* → *what will you do*
- How to manage resistance ("I don't want to play")
- How to adapt for quiet, withdrawn, or anxious groups
- How to avoid chaos without killing energy
- How to balance playfulness and safety
- Common facilitator mistakes — and how to recover

Grounded in: Brookfield (2013); Sawyer (2021); Dudeck & McClure (2018)



Photo: Jana Mirina

PART FOUR — WORKING WITH SPECIFIC GROUPS

The exercises in this toolkit were designed to work across a wide range of contexts and populations. But no exercise works the same way with every group. A warm-up that releases energy and laughter in one room may produce silence and withdrawal in another — not because the exercise is wrong, but because the group brings different histories, different relationships to learning, and different thresholds for risk.



This part offers one page of practical guidance for each of the five main target groups the Performing Bridges project works with. Each page follows the same format: who this group is and what characterises their relationship to learning; specific considerations for facilitation; recommended exercises from this toolkit; what to avoid; and one practitioner tip drawn from the project's direct experience.

These pages are not profiles or categories. They are starting points. Every group contains individuals whose experience will not fit the description. Use this guidance as a lens, not a label.

Migrants and Refugees

Key characteristics

Migrants and refugees bring enormous creative and cultural resources to a learning space — multiple languages, experience of navigating unfamiliar systems, resilience built through real difficulty, and a relationship to identity and belonging that is often more reflective than that of people who have never had to leave. They also arrive carrying experiences that educational settings rarely acknowledge: displacement, loss, interrupted education, the exhaustion of administrative processes, and the particular vulnerability of being in a place where your language, your credentials, and your social networks do not yet work.

Many will have had negative or interrupted experiences of formal education. Some will be managing ongoing trauma. All will be navigating the cognitive and emotional load of living in a language that is not their own.

Specific considerations

Language barriers are a resource, not an obstacle. In a multilingual group, no one has a natural advantage when the exercise uses gesture, movement, image, or sound rather than words. This is one of the most powerful things improvisation-based methods offer: a creative space where linguistic competence does not determine who gets to participate fully.

Pace and choice matter more than content. Trauma-aware facilitation does not mean avoiding difficult material. It means ensuring that participants always have a genuine choice about how much to engage, that the pace allows people to find their footing before being asked to go further, and that no one is ever put in a position of public exposure they did not consent to.

Body-based exercises are entry points, not advanced work. For participants who are still building language confidence, exercises that work through the body — gesture, movement, non-verbal communication — are often the most accessible starting point, not the most difficult. They allow full participation before verbal fluency is established.

Recommended exercises

- Introduction with Gestures (2.1.1) — immediate, non-verbal, equal participation from the first moment
- Gibberish Conversation (2.3.3) — levels the linguistic playing field entirely
- Silent Collaboration (2.5.1) — creative participation without language requirement



- Cultural Object Story (2.5.2) — values each person's background as a contribution
- One Word Round (2.7.1) — closing that works in any language

What to avoid

- Exercises that require rapid verbal response or wordplay in the group's shared language
- Prompts that assume a stable home, a continuous life story, or a clear sense of "where you come from"
- Forced sharing of personal history, especially in early sessions
- Exercises involving physical contact without explicit consent and established trust
- Debriefs that move too quickly from experience to abstract interpretation — stay close to what actually happened

Practitioner tip from Performing Bridges

In our sessions with newly arrived migrants in Portugal, we noticed that the moment the group switched to gibberish, the dynamic in the room changed completely. Participants who had been quiet and careful suddenly became expressive and playful. One participant said afterwards: "For the first time I felt equal." That moment became our reference point for the whole programme — we always returned to non-verbal exercises when the group needed to reset.

Adults with Fewer Opportunities / Low Confidence

Key characteristics

Adults with fewer opportunities is a broad category that includes people who left school early, adults who have experienced long-term unemployment, people living in poverty or social isolation, adults with low literacy, and others who have been systematically excluded from educational and civic life. What many share is a learned relationship to learning that is shaped by previous failure, judgment, or invisibility.

For these participants, the first question is rarely "what will I learn?" It is "will I be embarrassed?" The facilitator's primary task in the early sessions is not to deliver content but to demonstrate, through the design of the exercises themselves, that this space works differently from the educational settings they remember.

Specific considerations

Lower the threshold structurally, not just verbally. Telling participants "there are no wrong answers" is not enough if the exercise design still creates visible winners and losers. Choose exercises where every contribution is valid by construction — where standing still counts, where a single word is sufficient, where the group's response to any action is supportive rather than evaluative.



Build in immediate, visible success. The first exercise should be one that everyone can do and that produces a positive group response. Introduction with Gestures, where the whole group mirrors each person's movement, is ideal: every participant receives a moment of collective acknowledgement within the first ten minutes.

A mistake-positive culture must be modelled, not just stated. Make mistakes yourself, visibly and cheerfully. Run Mistake Celebration early in the programme. Return to it whenever the group's energy tightens around the fear of getting things wrong.

Short tasks, clear instructions, one thing at a time. Cognitive overload is a real barrier for participants who are already managing significant life stress. Keep instructions to two or three steps. Check understanding by demonstrating, not by asking "does everyone understand?" — a question that almost no one will answer honestly in a group setting.

Recommended exercises

- Introduction with Gestures (2.1.1) — immediate success, collective acknowledgement
- Mistake Celebration (2.4.1) — reframes the relationship to error from the start
- Yes, And (2.3.1) — practises acceptance and building, no wrong contributions
- One Word Round (2.7.1) — low-threshold closing that everyone can complete
- What I Want to Say (2.6.3) — powerful for participants who are rarely asked their opinion; keep participation optional

What to avoid

- Exercises that require sustained public performance before trust is established
- Competitive or evaluative framings ("who can do this best?")
- Long verbal debriefs in early sessions — use paired sharing or drawing instead
- Exercises from Section 2.6 (Civic Voice) before Sections 2.1 and 2.2 are well established
- Any language that implies participants are being assessed or observed for competence

Practitioner tip from Performing Bridges

We learned to watch for the moment when a participant laughed at their own mistake rather than looking to us for reassurance. That shift — from "did I do it wrong?" to "oh well, that was funny" — was the sign that the culture had taken hold. It usually happened around the third session. Everything after that point moved faster.

Multilingual and Multicultural Groups

Key characteristics

Multilingual and multicultural groups are not simply groups with a language problem. They are groups with an extraordinary resource: multiple ways of seeing, naming, and expressing



the world, present in the same room at the same time. The challenge for the facilitator is not to manage this diversity but to design exercises that make it visible and valuable.

In practice, these groups often organise themselves around a dominant language — usually the language of the host country or the group's shared second language — which means that participants with stronger competence in that language tend to take up more space, and participants with weaker competence tend to hold back. Improvisation-based methods can disrupt this dynamic structurally, by creating exercises in which linguistic competence is not the primary currency.

Specific considerations

Use gibberish, gesture, and image as shared languages. These are not simplified substitutes for "real" communication. They are genuinely shared modes of expression in which no one has a native advantage. In a multilingual group, they are among the most equalising tools available.

Embrace linguistic diversity as creative material. Invite participants to use their own languages in exercises where it is possible — One Word Round in any language, Cultural Object Story told in the speaker's mother tongue with a brief translation, Yes, And conducted in mixed languages within a pair. The presence of multiple languages in the room is not a problem to be solved; it is a creative condition to be used.

Be attentive to translation dynamics. In groups where some participants translate informally for others, this role carries both social capital and cognitive load. Acknowledge it, distribute it where possible, and ensure that translating participants are not consistently excluded from full participation in the exercise itself.

Recommended exercises

- Gibberish Conversation (2.3.3) — the single most equalising exercise in the toolkit
- Emotional Translation (2.3.4) — meaning travels without words
- Silent Collaboration (2.5.1) — creation without language
- Cultural Object Story (2.5.2) — linguistic diversity as content
- Introduction with Gestures (2.1.1) — names in any language, gestures universal

What to avoid

- Exercises that rely on wordplay, rhyme, or linguistic humour in the shared language
- Debriefs conducted only in the dominant language without space for other languages
- Assuming that participants who are quiet in the shared language have nothing to contribute
- Grouping participants by language background for exercises — mix deliberately to prevent clustering

Practitioner tip from Performing Bridges



In one session with a group of twelve participants speaking seven different languages, we ran One Word Round and invited everyone to offer their word in their mother tongue. The facilitator wrote each word on the board as it was spoken. By the end, the board held twelve words in seven languages, all meaning something close to "surprised." No one had planned that. The group sat looking at it in silence for a moment. It became one of the images we returned to throughout the programme.

Educators and Youth Workers as Learners

Key characteristics

Educators and youth workers bring significant professional experience to a learning space — and significant professional identity. They are accustomed to being the person who designs the exercise, manages the group, and holds the knowledge. Being asked to participate as learners, especially in activities that involve play, physical movement, or emotional expression, can feel threatening to that identity.

Resistance from this group tends to be more articulate and more intellectualised than resistance from other groups. It often takes the form of critical distance: *"I can see what this is doing, but I'm not sure it's appropriate for my context,"* or *"This is interesting, but my learners wouldn't respond to this."* This kind of resistance is not always wrong — it is often the beginning of a genuinely useful professional reflection. The facilitator's task is to engage it rather than dismiss it.

Specific considerations

Frame the exercises as professional development, not personal therapy. Educators are more likely to engage with improvisation if they understand it as a method they are learning to use, not a process they are being subjected to. Name the transferable skill before each exercise. Connect the debrief explicitly to their professional context.

Acknowledge the dual role. Educators in these sessions are simultaneously participants and observers. This is a legitimate and productive position. Invite them to notice both their own experience and what the exercise might produce in a group they work with.

Resistance is data. When an educator says "my learners wouldn't do this," ask them what that tells them about their learners' relationship to risk and participation — and what it might take to change it. This reframes resistance as a professional question rather than a personal objection.

Connect to what they already know. Most experienced educators have intuitions about group dynamics, trust, and the conditions for learning that align closely with the principles of this toolkit. Draw those connections explicitly. Brookfield (2013) notes that adult professionals learn most effectively when new approaches are connected to their existing expertise rather than positioned as a replacement for it.



Recommended exercises

- Yes, And (2.3.1) — directly transferable to facilitation practice; debrief around "what would it mean to use this in a difficult conversation with a learner?"
- Mistake Celebration (2.4.1) — surfaces professional attitudes to error; rich debrief material
- Forum Scene (2.6.2) — connects directly to professional scenarios; educators often have strong responses to scenes involving power and exclusion
- Character Walk (2.4.3) — useful for exploring different professional roles and the emotional weight they carry
- Letter to Myself (2.7.2) — professional reflection and commitment

What to avoid

- Positioning improvisation as superior to what educators already do
- Skipping the professional framing and going straight to play — this group needs the "why" before the "what"
- Debriefs that stay only at the personal level without connecting to professional application
- Exercises that feel infantilising without a clear professional rationale

Practitioner tip from Performing Bridges

The turning point with educator groups is almost always the debrief after Mistake Celebration. When we ask "how do you respond to mistakes in your own classroom or workplace?", the room changes. Educators who were sceptical ten minutes earlier are suddenly engaged in one of the most honest professional conversations of the session. The exercise creates the conditions for the reflection — but the reflection is where the real learning happens.

Artists Entering Educational Settings

Key characteristics

Artists — theatre practitioners, performers, musicians, visual artists — bring a different set of strengths and challenges to facilitation. They are typically comfortable with improvisation, physical expression, and creative risk. They are often less comfortable with the slower pace, the lower threshold, and the non-performative quality that effective educational facilitation requires.

The most common difficulty for artists entering educational settings is the shift from doing to enabling. In performance, the artist's job is to be excellent. In facilitation, the artist's job is to make space for others — including others who will never be excellent in the artist's terms, and whose participation is valuable precisely because it is unpolished, tentative, and real.



Specific considerations

The difference between doing improv and teaching with improv is fundamental. An artist who runs an exercise the way they would run it in a rehearsal room — with high energy, high expectations, and a clear aesthetic standard — will lose most of the participants in a vulnerable adult learning group within the first ten minutes. The skills required are different: patience, attentiveness to the group rather than the exercise, willingness to slow down and celebrate the small.

Facilitation is its own art form. This reframe is often useful for artists who feel they are being asked to do something lesser than their practice. Holding a room, reading a group, knowing when to intervene and when to wait — these are sophisticated skills that take years to develop. They are not a simplified version of performance. They are a different discipline (Sawyer, 2021).

Watch for the impulse to demonstrate. Artists often demonstrate exercises with a level of skill and expressiveness that inadvertently raises the bar for participants. Keep demonstrations minimal and deliberately imperfect. Your job is to show what is possible, not what is impressive.

Connect facilitation to the artist's existing values. Most artists who enter educational settings do so because they believe in the social value of creative practice. Connect the facilitation principles in this toolkit — psychological safety, dialogical participation, creative risk — to the values that brought them to this work in the first place (Johnstone, 1979).

Recommended exercises

Start with exercises the artist finds easy to facilitate — typically the more physical and playful ones — and build toward the more relational and reflective exercises as facilitation confidence grows.

- Introduction with Gestures (2.1.1) — simple structure, immediate group response
- Yes, Let's (2.1.3) — familiar improv structure, easy to facilitate
- Emotional Orchestra (2.4.2) — uses the artist's expressive vocabulary in a facilitation role
- Open Improvisation Jam (2.5.3) — closest to the artist's own practice, but requires strong facilitation discipline to hold without directing
- Appreciation Circle (2.7.3) — practises the relational attention that distinguishes facilitation from performance

What to avoid

- Using the session as an opportunity to demonstrate the artist's own skill
- Moving too fast through exercises that the artist finds easy but participants find challenging
- Treating the debrief as an interruption to the creative work rather than its culmination
- Designing sessions around what is aesthetically interesting rather than what the group needs



Practitioner tip from Performing Bridges

We worked with a theatre director who was brilliant in the room but kept losing participants in the debrief — they would give one-word answers and he would move on. We asked him to try something: after each debrief question, wait for three responses before speaking again.

The next session, the debriefs lasted twice as long and produced material none of us had anticipated. He said afterwards: "I realised I had been directing the debrief the same way I direct a scene — towards the outcome I already had in mind."



ANNEX A1 Facilitator Checklist

Session date: _____

Group: _____

Facilitator: _____

1. BEFORE THE SESSION

- ☐ I know which exercises I am planning to use and in what order. Have a backup exercise ready in case one does not land.
- ☐ I have read the "What to watch for" notes for each exercise.
- ☐ I know the group: who is new, who may need extra support, any relevant context. Check with a co-worker or coordinator if you are not sure.
- ☐ The room is set up: furniture moved if needed, space to move freely.
- ☐ Any materials needed are ready (paper, pens, envelopes, music).
- ☐ I have allowed at least 15 minutes at the end for closing and debrief.
- ☐ I have checked in with myself: how am I arriving today? What do I need to set aside? Your energy sets the tone. Take two minutes before participants arrive.

2. DURING THE SESSION

- ☐ I welcomed participants and briefly named the focus of today's session.
- ☐ I gave instructions briefly — what, how, start — without over-explaining.
- ☐ I modelled the exercise before asking participants to try it.
- ☐ Participation was genuinely optional — no one was pressured to join.
- ☐ I noticed who was active and who was holding back, and responded accordingly.
- ☐ I allowed silences rather than filling them immediately.
- ☐ I stopped or adjusted any exercise that was not working, without apology.
- ☐ I ran a debrief after each core exercise: What happened → What did you notice → What does it mean → What will you do

3. AFTER THE SESSION

- ☐ I closed the session with a clear, acknowledged ending — not just a stop.
- ☐ I checked in briefly with any participant who seemed distressed or withdrawn.
- ☐ I noted which exercises worked well and which I would change.
- ☐ I noted any participant I want to follow up with or keep an eye on next session.
- ☐ I answered at least two self-reflection questions from Section 3.3.
- ☐ I have a clear idea of where to start next session.

Notes from this session



ANNEX A2 — Session Planning Template

SESSION DETAILS

Date: _____ | Location / Platform: _____

Facilitator: _____ | Co-facilitator / Observer: _____

Group: _____ | Number of participants: _____

BEFORE THE SESSION

What do I know about the group?

What do I want participants to leave with today — one sentence:

Any specific needs or considerations for this session?

TEMPLATE A — 60-MINUTE SESSION

Total exercises: 2–3 maximum. Depth over variety.

0–5 min | ARRIVAL AND SETTLING

What I will say to open:

5–15 min | OPENING EXERCISE

Exercise name: _____

Section: _____ Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced Format: Offline / Online

Key instruction I want to remember:

What to watch for:



15–35 min | CORE EXERCISE

Exercise name: _____

Section: _____ Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced Format: Offline / Online

Key instruction I want to remember:

What to watch for:

Debrief question I will use:

35–50 min | SECOND EXERCISE OR EXTENSION

Exercise name (or: second round of core exercise): _____

What to watch for:

50–58 min | CLOSING EXERCISE

Exercise name: _____ (suggested: One Word Round)

58–60 min | CLOSE

One sentence I will say to close:

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR THIS SESSION:



TEMPLATE B — 90-MINUTE SESSION

Total exercises: 3–4. Include one full debrief and one reflection exercise.

0–5 min | ARRIVAL AND SETTLING

What I will say to open:

5–20 min | OPENING SEQUENCE

Exercise 1: _____

Section: _____ Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced Format: Offline / Online

Exercise 2: _____

Section: _____ Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced Format: Offline / Online

20–45 min | CORE EXERCISE WITH FULL DEBRIEF

Exercise name: _____

Section: _____ Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced Format: Offline / Online

Key instruction I want to remember:

What to watch for:

Debrief questions (choose 2–3):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

45–65 min | SECOND CORE EXERCISE

Exercise name: _____



Section: _____ | Difficulty: Entry / Intermediate / Advanced | Format: Offline / Online

Key instruction I want to remember:

What to watch for:

Debrief question I will use:

65–80 min | REFLECTION EXERCISE

Exercise name: _____ (suggested: Letter to Myself / Appreciation Circle / Story of a Change)

80–88 min | CLOSING

Exercise name: _____ (suggested: One Word Round)

88–90 min | CLOSE

One sentence I will say to close:

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR THIS SESSION:

AFTER THE SESSION — QUICK NOTES

What worked well:

What I would change:



ANNEX A3 — Group Agreement

Our Agreement for This Space

This agreement belongs to the group. It is not a set of rules imposed from outside — it is a shared decision about how we want to be together. Read each point aloud together, discuss it briefly, and add or change anything that matters to your group. Sign at the bottom when you are ready.

WE AGREE THAT THIS IS A SPACE WHERE:

- 1. Everyone belongs.** You do not need to speak the language perfectly, know the exercises, or have done anything like this before. You belong here as you are.
- 2. Participation is always a choice.** You can watch, you can pass, you can join when you feel ready. No one will be pressured to do anything they do not want to do.
- 3. Mistakes are welcome.** Getting things wrong is part of the process. We celebrate mistakes here — they are a sign that someone is trying something new.
- 4. What is shared here stays here.** Personal stories, feelings, and experiences shared in this space are not repeated outside it without the person's permission.
- 5. We listen when someone speaks.** One person at a time. We do not interrupt, advise, or judge. We receive what is offered.
- 6. We take care of each other.** If someone seems uncomfortable or upset, we notice. We do not draw attention to it publicly, but we do not ignore it either.
- 7. We use language that includes everyone.** We avoid words or expressions that exclude, stereotype, or demean — even unintentionally. If something lands badly, we say so, and we move on without blame.
- 8. Our bodies are our own.** No physical contact without consent. If an exercise involves touch, everyone has the right to opt out without explanation.

OUR GROUP ADDS:

Is there anything else that matters to your group? Write it here.

1. _____

2. _____



SIGNATURES

By signing, each person confirms they have heard the agreement and are willing to hold it — for themselves and for the group.

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

A NOTE FOR THE FACILITATOR

This agreement works best when it is built with the group rather than presented to them. Read each point aloud and invite brief responses: *"Does this feel right? Is there anything you would change or add?"* Allow the group to own the language. If a participant suggests a different wording, use it.

Return to this agreement at the start of subsequent sessions — a brief reminder, not a full re-reading. If something happens in the session that breaks the agreement, name it calmly and refer back to what the group decided together.

The agreement is a living document. It can be revised at any point if the group decides to change it.



ANNEX A4 — Participant Reflection Sheet

This sheet is for you. There are no right or wrong answers. You do not need to share it with anyone unless you want to. Take your time.

Your name (optional): _____ **|Date:** _____

PART 1 — LOOKING BACK AT TODAY

1. How did you feel today?

When I arrived, I felt: _____

When I am leaving, I feel: _____

2. Was there a moment today that stayed with you?

3. Was there a moment that was difficult or uncomfortable?

4. Did you try something today that you would not normally try?

☐ Yes — what was it? _____

☐ No — what held you back? _____

☐ I am not sure

PART 2 — WHAT YOU ARE TAKING AWAY

5. Complete one or more of these sentences:

Today I discovered _____

Today I was surprised by

Today I found it hard to _____

Today I felt most myself when _____

6. Is there something from today you want to remember in a week's time?

7. Is there something you want to try in your life, your work, or your relationships?



PART 3 — FOR THE FACILITATOR (OPTIONAL)

You can share this with the facilitator if you wish. It helps them plan future sessions.

8. Was there anything in today's session that did not work for you?

9. Is there something you would like more of in future sessions?

10. Is there anything you would like the facilitator to know — about you, about the group, or about today?

Thank you for being here today.

Facilitator: _____ | *Group:* _____ | *Date:* _____



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