

Theater Games for Your Classroom: Origins of Improv and Community Theater at Hull-House

Grade Level: 5th - 12th

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Jane Addams
Hull-House Museum

**JANE ADDAMS
HULL-HOUSE
MUSEUM**



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Introduction

The **Jane Addams Hull-House Museum** serves as a dynamic memorial to social reformer **Jane Addams**, the first American woman to receive the **Nobel Peace Prize**, and her colleagues at the **Hull-House Settlement**. Their work changed the lives of their immigrant neighbors as well as national and international public policy. The Museum preserves and develops the original Hull-House site for the interpretation and continuation of the historic settlement house vision. Exhibitions and public programs connect the histories of the Hull-House Settlement to present-day social justice issues, and highlight histories of activism, progressive education and democratic principles of participation and exchange.

Founded in 1889 as a social settlement, Hull-House played a vital role in redefining American democracy in the modern age. The **Hull Mansion** (built in 1856) served as the origins of the Settlement House which expanded into 13 buildings by the early 1900s. Over the course of its history Hull-House housed over 100 Residents, mostly college-educated men and women who offered a multitude of classes that were influenced by the surrounding neighborhood of immigrants and low-income families. Hull-House Reformers offered programs that taught fundamental skills necessary for living and working in the United States, such as English-language, reading, and writing classes. Hull-House co-founder, activist, and art teacher **Ellen Gates-Starr** also organized art history classes and opened a book bindery at the Settlement.

The Hull-House Settlement took part in the first large-scale national sociological study focused on America's rapidly growing, congested, and industrialized cities, called *The Slums of Baltimore, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia*. *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, an expansion of the Settlement's contribution to the study, included a survey of the neighbors living in the 19th Ward and information about their earnings, nationalities, education, health, and other living conditions. Colored maps that tracked nationalities and household wages of the surrounding community advocated for action on behalf of these marginalized populations. The book included 10 essays written by leading social reformers and Hull-House Residents. Modeled after sociological maps by **John Snow** and **Charles Booth**, the colorful maps and narrative essays laid the groundwork for the many programs that were developed during Hull-House's 70-year history.

Hull-House offered cultural programs that explored the heritage of the many ethnic groups living in their area. These programs, often led by the immigrant population, helped people tell the stories of their (im)migrant experience and also showed what made them special. One such program was the **Hull-House Kilns**. This program employed many Mexican artists who created pottery that helped support their families during its 10-year run.

Hull-House supported the passage of critical legislation and influenced public policy in public health, education, free speech, fair labor practices, immigrants' rights, recreation and public space, arts, and philanthropy. Hull-House has long been a center of Chicago's political and cultural life, establishing Chicago's first public playground and public art gallery, helping to desegregate the Chicago Public Schools, and influencing philanthropy and culture.

Use this educational packet to bring Hull-House history to life in your classroom. Inside you will find participatory arts activities that will help students explore Hull-House Settlement initiatives and the biographies of **Hull-House Reformers and Neighbors**. Jane Addams Hull-House Museum's educator-led tours are designed to expand and supplement the activities in this packet and enhance your students' experience with a **National Historic Site** and international monument to the fights for democratic ideals.

Theater Exercises for Educators

The **Hull-House Settlement** has a rich history of theater arts. **Viola Spolin** and **Neva Boyd**, two Hull-House Educators and well-known theater innovators, used improvisation as a basis for their instruction in the 1920s-40s. Hull-House adapted the following theater exercises for educators to use inside and outside the classroom. Improvisation games are physical and experiential learning opportunities that break the mold of traditional classroom teaching styles¹.

As a city of neighborhoods, Chicago is home to some of the most ethnically rich communities. Many members of these diverse enclaves attended classes and programs at the Hull-House Settlement during the **Progressive Era**. Improvisation classes and theater games supported diverse neighborhood residents in becoming fuller participants in democratic society. These four theater games below can be used as pedagogical tools by and for educators and students to increase awareness and understanding of the differences that exist among learners. Incorporating our own stories not only allows for a more compassionate, collaborative, and participatory learning environment, but also adds a distinctive and personalized value to education and discussion.

¹ Progressive Era educators greatly influenced the work of Hull-House social reformers. Among these influences were: John Dewey, innovator of hands-on learning practices; and Maria Montessori, known widely for student-centered learning environments and the creation of Montessori Schools.



Neva Boyd | Hull-House Social Reformer and founder of the Recreational Training School. Image courtesy of ViolaSpolin.org



Viola Spolin | Hull-House Social Reformer and director of Hull-House theater in the 1920s. Image courtesy of ViolaSpolin.org

Theater Games

1. I Am A Tree
2. Slide Show
3. Machine (Adapted from Viola Spolin)
4. One Word At a Time



Image: Participatory Arts: The legacy of Chicago's Hull-House Artists , Symposium, Oct. 23-25, 2018. Aretha Sills (not pictured) leads symposium attendants in a theater game used by her grandmother, Viola Spolin. (Photo: Jesse Meredith).

01. I Am A Tree²

Outcomes: Students create a story out of a single object through building a tableau.

Objectives: To explore storytelling through focusing on disparate layers of relationship on macro and micro levels; To understand the interconnectedness of characters and their stories.

Description:

Explain to students that we are going to create a tableau, or a frozen picture. One volunteer stands, enters the tableau and proclaims, "I am a tree!" and takes on physicality of a tree (arms splayed as branches, etc.). Another volunteer joins the tree, choosing how to relate to the tree: i.e., "I am a branch on the tree." Another student adds a relationship to the branch, "I am an apple hanging on the branch on the tree." Each volunteer must relate to the most recent addition, but this does not always require physical touch. Encourage students to embody non-contact relationships, i.e., "I am a child who is trying to pick the apple hanging on the branch on the tree," or "I am the sun shining on the apple on the branch of the tree." After the last volunteer has gone, be sure to repeat the story, working backwards from the last volunteer to the tree: "This is the baseball hat on the child reaching to pick the apple hanging on the branch of the tree." If students add too many people (the sister of the mother of the child...etc), try saying, "no more people!"

Debrief & Discussion Questions:

- What did you like about this exercise?
What did you dislike?
What did you find challenging?
- Did any of you begin the exercise with ideas about how our story might end up? How did the story we created differ from that initial idea?
- How does this exercise help us talk about our own stories?
 - We realize that no story exists in a vacuum - every thing and every person in our life affects our journey, and each has the power to influence a different outcome. No two stories are alike because of our relationships to other people and to our surroundings that differ, and that's why your own story is unique and worth sharing.
- How would this game differ if playing with a larger group?
- Were there any choices you were surprised by? Agreed with? Confused by? Why?
- Let's go back to a certain point in our story and change one relationship (i.e., "Instead of an apple on the branch of the tree, you are a monkey swinging on the branch". You can also let the students choose). Play out how your new story ends.

² Ted DesMaisons, "Spontaneity School: 10 Improv Games to Develop Courage, Compassion and Creativity," ANIMA, August 29, 2012, accessed February 15, 2019. <https://animalearning.com/2012/08/29/fresh-start-10-improv-games-to-develop-courage-compassion-and-creativity/>

02. Slide Show³

Outcomes: Students will be able to explore storytelling (both creation and interpretation) through physical stillness, gestures, facial expressions and body language.

Objectives: To explore how physicality can shape stories; to collaborate through non-verbal communication.

Description:

Divide students into small groups. One group starts on stage, and the facilitator welcomes the audience to a viewing of their vacation photos. Ask for a suggestion of vacation location - the beach, Disney World, Paris, etc. Facilitator begins "slide show" by explaining the photo we are about to see, says, "CLICK!," and gives students 5-10 seconds to create a tableau of the scene. Example: "The next photo I'm going to show you is when we tried to climb the Eiffel Tower - it was a little more difficult than we anticipated...CLICK". Students then present tableau (some are the Eiffel Tower, some are climbing, some are surrounding scenery, onlookers, etc.) They must collaborate using nonverbal cues to communicate how the scene should look. Repeat a sequence of 4-5 slides with each group. A variation can be played in reverse, where the tableau is created first and then interpreted.



Image: Spolin/Sills Tribute, June 20, 2019. (Photo: Sarah Larson)

Debrief & Discussion Questions

- What did you like about this exercise?
What did you dislike?
What did you find challenging?
- What were the most interesting "slides"?
Why?
- What makes a slide more successful
(easy to interpret)?
- Specificity: If someone knows exactly what they are portraying, does the audience appear more engaged and willing to believe the scene?
- Why might one person's portrayal differ from that of another person?
- Act it out: ask two volunteers to portray the same object. Ask students to describe each one. What are some reasons these might be different?
- How does this exercise help us tell stories?
 - Body language, gestures, and facial expressions can inform our story without the use of language
- How could the slide's story change based on the narrator?
- Act it out: Have the narrator (facilitator or student) tell the same story from a "slide" in slightly different styles (one reads it as a fairy tale; the other reads it as a scary story, etc.)
- How do stories change when someone tells another person's story?
 - Playing a game of "telephone" could be helpful here in demonstrating diversity in interpretation and how stories change over

³ "Drama Game: Slide Show," Beat by Beat Press, August 03, 2015, accessed February 15, 2019, <http://www.bbbpress.com/2015/01/drama-game-slide-show/>.

03. Machine⁴

(Adapted From Viola Spolin⁵)

Outcomes: Students collaborate to produce one cohesive “machine” made up of individual gestures and sounds.

Objectives: To recognize theater as a collaborative art form; to develop creativity and cooperation skills.

Description:

Invite students to define what a “machine” is; discuss different machines that they are aware of, what they do, how the machine’s different parts function, etc. Pick one of these machines and ask the group what sounds we might hear or what movements (gestures) we might see from this machine. Ask a volunteer to choose one sound and movement and present it to the group in the front of your space. This must be a sound and gesture that they can do repeatedly for a few minutes - they are the first part of the machine. Then, ask another student to add a new part (a different sound and motion) to our machine that works with the first part. Students may be gradually asked to join the machine, or they can choose to join on their own.

When the machine has reached a considerable size, announce that you are going to experiment with tempo and turn up the speed of the machine - what will this make the machine look/sound like? Then turn down the speed so that the machine’s parts work in slow motion. After playing with dynamics, tell the machine to freeze. Ask your audience if the machine has taken a new form - is it the original machine we started with, or has our machine changed its function? As the students become familiar with this exercise, choose more obscure machines (tree house machine, birthday machine, scary movie machine) or even name the machine.

Debrief & Discussion Questions

- What did you like about this exercise? What did you dislike? What did you find challenging?
- Did you know your part’s function before you began? Or did you decide after you started your movement/sound? How did this evolution (if any) come to be? Explain your thought process.
- How did you go about choosing your part to add? How did you adapt or struggle to adapt to the piece in front of you?
- Were there any choices that surprised you? Impressed you?
- What does this exercise teach us about collaboration and how we all fit together?
- How would our machine work differently with less people? More people?



Viola Spolin | Rehearsal at Hull-House
Image courtesy of ViolaSpolin.org

⁴ “Machine,” Drama-Based Instruction, accessed 15 February 2019, <https://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/teaching-strategies/machine>.

⁵ Viola Spolin, Theater Games For The Classroom, ed. Arthur Morey and Mary Ann Brandt (Northwestern University Press, 1986), 68.

04. One Word At a Time⁶

Outcomes: Students create stories and narratives one word at a time; students learn spontaneity and cooperation; the concept of “Yes, and”⁷.

Objectives: To practice listening; To explore linear storytelling despite nonsensical circumstances.

Description:

5-10 volunteers stand in a line facing the audience. Tell them they are going to tell a story that has never been told before, and they are going to tell this story one word at a time. Take suggestions from the audience for an original title of the story we are about to hear. The student on the left starts the story. Don’t hesitate to start a new story when students seem stumped or are struggling to keep the story going. Remind students that there is no right way this story can be told - the audience is hearing it for the first time. Encourage students to try to stay in the moment and listen to each word - and to try not to predict where the story will go until it is their turn. It will take a few tries before the group understands the flow and develops a rhythm.

Debrief & Discussion Questions

- What did you like about this exercise?
What did you dislike?
What did you find challenging?
- When were the most successful parts of the story?
- What are some important skills we have to use in this game?
 - Emphasize listening. If one person doesn’t listen, they can derail the team.
- How does this game help us with storytelling and collective storytelling?
- How did it feel to have to translate shifts in the story on the spot?
- How do differing viewpoints, backgrounds, and experiences contribute to the story?



Image: Spolin/Sills Tribute, June 20, 2019. (Photo: Sarah Larson)

⁶ Izzy Gesell, MEd, *Playing Along: The Book* (Duluth, MN: Whole Person Associates, 1997).

⁷ “Yes, and” is considered the first rule of improvisation. Players must accept and embrace any and all ideas from their teammates (“Yes”) and support, embellish or add to that idea (“and”). This acceptance and addition allows for players to collaborate and fully flesh out the world of their scene.

Exhibition Information

In a first-ever partnership, **Jane Addams Hull-House Museum** (JAHHM), **Public Media Institute** (PMI) and the **Smart Museum of Art** will present a year-long series of experimental audio performances from **Guillermo Gómez-Peña**, a performance artist, writer, activist, and **MacArthur Fellow**, class of 1991. Beginning on Wednesday, January 27, 2021 6:30 (CST), **Gómez-Peña's Mex Files: Audio Art & Strange Poetry from the US/Mexico Border** (1985–2021) offers multi-lingual live radio and a selection of archival audio programs by the artist addressing “the multiple pandemics of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and neo-colonialism on steroids in the Trump Era.” Throughout his life, Gómez-Peña has worked in audio art and radio across multiple genres, from poetic journalism to Spanglish spoken word, radical storytelling and collaborations with musicians, poets, and activists. This ongoing series will present samples of his previous work (1980–2015) and newly recorded material created in the last two years and during lock-down. Audiences can tune in to Gómez-Peña's live broadcasts on **105.5 FM WLPN-LP** or stream on **twitch.tv/lumpenradio** and listen to what you missed on JAHHM's website.

An Open Letter to the Museums of the Future

Gómez-Peña's Mex Files was highlighted by the live video performance “**An Open Letter to the Museums of the Future**” on February 3rd 2021 at 6:30 PM. Gómez-Peña has an obsession with rewriting and re-staging so-called “Western Art History” while highlighting colonial legacies of systematic exclusion, demonization and fetishization of Brown, Black and Indigenous bodies. This keynote challenges contemporary art museum practices and calls for an open discussion regarding radical restructuring from within. Later in the radio series, Gómez-Peña will be joined by invited luminaries in the field who will offer their own responses to the **Museum of the Future**.

Exhibition at JAHHM

The audio series will lead up to the new exhibition featuring **Gómez-Peña, La Pocha Nostra** and their incisive challenges to the capital Art World, past and present, to the current debates on cultural hegemony and white supremacy. The exhibition will

be presented from **September 9, 2021 to May 31, 2022** at JAHHM, continuing the Museum's efforts to be a dynamic historical site for democratic principles and cultural exchange.

On **September 9, 2021**, the week of the 161st anniversary of Jane Addams' birth, JAHHM will present new performances and experimental audio by **Guillermo Gómez-Peña**. The exhibition will also present archival materials and videos from a number of collaborative Chicago-based performances including the iconic *The Year of the White Bear* and *Couple in The Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, devised and performed with artist **Coco Fusco**, that travelled to **Chicago's Field Museum** in January 1993 in collaboration with the **Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum** (now the **National Museum of Mexican Art**). Gómez-Peña's insurgent performances challenge how museums represent so-called discovered people and take back the commons on behalf of outsider identities and marginalized communities.

Alongside new performances, experimental audio, video, and archival material of

Chicago-based performances by Gómez-Peña, JAHHM will present Hull-House social reformers' efforts, with their immigrant neighbors, to provide access to the arts and create a common museum. The Hull-House Settlement's first new building was the **Butler Art Gallery**, Chicago's first public art gallery. The location of the gallery, in the most disenfranchised and disinvested area of the city, was testament that art should be accessible in communities of all kinds. In 1900, Hull-House co-founders **Jane Addams** and **Ellen Gates Starr** opened the **Labor Museum**. The experimental museum provided craft demonstrations in textiles, metals, woodwork, and bookbinding in an effort to reflect the diverse cultural heritage present in the congested and disregarded immigrant community. The experimental museum used historical interpretation and cultural performances to break down barriers—within immigrant families, and between immigrants and their American neighbors—to present women's work and immigrant culture as valuable. JAHHM's exhibition will look back on these cross-cultural experiments in relation to present-day demands for structural change inside cultural institutions.

About Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum serves as a dynamic memorial to social reformer **Jane Addams**, the first American woman to receive the **Nobel Peace Prize**, and her colleagues whose work changed the lives of their immigrant neighbors as well as national and international public policy. The Museum preserves and develops the original Hull-House site for the interpretation and continuation of the historic settlement house vision, connecting the histories of the **Hull-House Settlement** to present-day social justice issues. Exhibitions and public programs highlight histories of activism, progressive education and democratic principles of participation and exchange.

Museum Hours

Tuesday - Friday & Sunday
9:10 AM - 4:50 PM
Closed Monday and Saturday

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**JANE ADDAMS
HULL-HOUSE
MUSEUM**



Group Tours

Jane Addams, Hull-House Settlement and Chicago Tour

(3rd Grade - Adult, 1 Hour)

Learn about the conditions immigrants faced in the 19th Ward of Chicago, the unique work of the Hull-House residents, the life and work of Jane Addams, and the lasting impact of the Hull-House Settlement.

Vernacular Architecture Tour

(3rd Grade - Adult, 1 Hour)

Explore the historic preservation of the 1850s Hull Mansion and the neighborhood conditions in the Near West Side at the turn of the 20th century in Chicago.

Gender and Sexuality Tour

(High School - Adult, 1 Hour)

Bring Chicago history out of the closet! Join us for a tour of Hull-House and explore early 20th century stories of gender non-conformity, diverse definitions of family, and fierce self-expression.

For more information visit
hullhousemuseum.org/group-tours