

Faculty Development Grantee Report
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Grantee Report, Part 1: Improv Course at Upright Citizens Brigade

I came. I saw. I said, ‘yes, and...’ For three months at the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), I improvised, playing characters like a weight lifter who hates her body or a minister who gives baptisms in shopping mall fountains. This class helped me in developing a new course at Otis College: “Improv: A Social Critique”, a class that connects improv to the artistic process and to the themes of social responsibility, creativity, and diversity.

The classes at UCB demanded adaptability and the willingness to fail in front of a lot of people (this course culminated in a performance at the UCB Theater in Hollywood). The meat of UCB is doing scenes. Improvisers are given a suggestion and initiate what’s called the ‘base reality’, the *who*, *what*, and *where* of the scene. It’s imperative that improvisers agree with these details of base reality (that’s where the popular ‘yes, and...’ principle comes from). If I say I’m a doctor in my office and you respond by saying you’re a clown in clown college, we have no coherent reality or relationship. The clown is negating the doctor’s existence. Improvisers don’t always have to say ‘yes’, but they should always agree when it pertains to the basic reality of who they are, where they are, and what they are physically doing. Otherwise it’s chaos and no one can work together.

My main objective in the class at UCB was to connect what I learned to the needs of my students. I didn’t want to merely bring improv games to Otis. I wanted to bridge improv theater with the personal and political. My improv class at the college is underway and students spend an hour getting loose with improv exercises and then connect these lessons – *taking care of one another; listening instead of planning; being clunky and clear instead of clever and vague* – to their own challenges in art and design. For their research papers they are diagnosing a political or social problem and seeing how improv techniques could help, or possibly oversimplify, the issue.

But the root of my new course at Otis is looking at how we already improvise in our daily lives. Conversation is improv. Friendships are improv. Dancing and walking and eating all require improvisation. We also look at when it’s best to plan, to *not* fly by the seat of our pants.

I’m grateful for this grant. I couldn’t have developed a course like this without my work at Upright Citizens Brigade. Incidentally, I’m hooked. I plan on taking another course and joining a troupe.



UCB rehearsal



UCB Theater

Grantee Report, Part 2: Threepenny Editor, Sarah Cypher

If the process were easy, I probably wouldn't learn much.

Editor Sarah Cypher read the second draft of my manuscript *THE SERIOUS ARTIST* and gave me a critique letter along with extensive manuscript notes. I was happy and anxious to receive her feedback; my novel had been a finalist in a contest she judged earlier in the year and she'd expressed how excited she was about my work. Finally! Someone understood what I was trying to do!

But Sarah's crit it was difficult to digest. Reading her notes felt more like an uncomfortable confrontation with a dear friend than reading comments about fictional characters from a person I'd only just met. And, not surprising to any of my writing brethren, I'm going to have to spend more time on revision than I expected.

All that said, Sarah's feedback was also refreshing. She made suggestions that I'd planned on pursuing at the onset of the novel, but I'd lost my way somehow. Her most useful note? Focus on the *internal* drama. The readers need to see my protagonist grow more in order to get what she wants. Put Miranda (the hero) on a more "visible journey of self-discovery and growth and pare down the number of external conflicts."

I'm currently going through each chapter and revising moments to make Miranda more vulnerable, but what is most surprising about this experience is how much Sarah's editing helped me as an English Teacher. I'm coming off of a week-long grading jag and I found myself relaying some of Sarah's suggestions. Namely, I was able to give more precise feedback on character arc, suggesting where and when characters could react to a difficult moment, suggesting different ways to convey difficult emotion.

I have a lot of work ahead of me, but it's that invigorating, soulful kind of work. I've recommitted to what prompted me to start this book in the first place – that humbling one's self leads to truth and beauty. Apparently I needed another exercise in humility before I could render it on the page.