Improvisation for Scientists?
What's the point?

Improvisation is fundamental to our program because it gives you ways to connect with an audience, which is the first essential step in communicating. In our improvisation workshop on Thursday, we focused on paying attention to the other people, anticipating and meeting their needs, reading their reactions and taking responsibility for landing a clear message. In the other workshops this weekend you can apply and build on these tools. Moving forward, look for ways you can apply them in your everyday communication.

Make it a conversation. Many of the games that we played were about staying available, aware and connected to the people you were playing with. You need to let in the event of the moment that is in front of you in order to communicate your message. Communication is a two-way street. In the improvisational games you were working to communicate **with** your partner(s), rather than talk **at** them. This requires a change in you – a willingness to listen, notice and be available to the signs that are in front of you. Out of this availability, something new emerges. You experienced new ways of saying old information if you allowed your partner(s) or audience to help you present your science as though it were a conversation rather than a lecture. Even if you are the only one talking, you are still having a conversation: The energy coming back to you from the audience needs to influence how you are presenting your science to them. If you are not allowing them in, your speech will drift into lecture mode and the link of moment-to-moment communication will be lost.

Are you afraid of speaking to the public? Stage fright comes from focus being in the wrong place. If you are afraid, you are probably focused on YOU! Try to switch the focus to THEM! If you are working to connect with another person, your nerves will dissipate naturally. Your concern will be on the other person. Remind yourself of this often. Switch your focus to them. What do they need from you? How can you help them?

Who is the audience? Are they a group of young people touring your lab? Are they legislators who could influence funding? Are they scientists from other disciplines who might potentially become collaborators? Are they venture capitalists you meet at a cocktail party? Communication is a two-way street and that begins with relationship. If you don't know the audience or anything about them, start the relationship from a positive perspective. If you come in with the expectation that they will be welcoming, they are likely to pick up on that signal and reciprocate. (This is an organic response from your audience to the "yes, and" rule of improv.) Usually, the audience is there for a positive reason – they want hear you speak. Our own fear causes us to forget that and cripples our ability to connect. Watch how your fear can shift if you define your relationship with these people in a way that puts you at ease so you can communicate clearly.

Are you bringing your audience with you? Think of the mirror exercise. As the leader of this exercise, your main goal was to move slowly and specifically enough so that your partner could follow you. If your partner wasn't able to stay with you, your job was to make an adjustment so he or she could follow. Now translate the principles of this exercise into a presentation. Look at the audience. Are you making

your points slowing and clearly enough that they can follow you? If not, how can you adjust your presentation to bring them along? You may have prepared a terrific presentation that seems to fall flat when you are in front of the audience. If this happens, chances are you are not really paying attention to the signals that are coming to you from the audience and making the adjustments they need!

Are you taking responsibility? Think of Time Traveler. Are you finding common ground with your listener and speaking from what you understand about their perspective? Are you empathetic to their needs and concerns when speaking – using analogies, metaphors and gestures to help them bridge the gaps. Are you flexible enough to change course when they are lost, so you can land your message clearly. Remember – if there is no understanding on the receiving end, you might as well not be talking.

Are you selling your idea vividly and clearly? Think of Beaker/Bagel. You needed to sell a completely fabricated object by describing it and justifying why it could be of benefit to our lives. The format of a live television audience brought you out of your shells. Think about this. You had a strong objective: to sell us on an innovative idea. You had to quickly describe and justify an abstract object and help us understand how it applied to our lives. You were vivid and expressive. If you can make someone want to learn more or be delighted by your enthusiasm, you've won half the battle.

What is your story? Think of the picture exercise. Remember that the audience can't see the picture – you need to reveal it to us in evocative detail. What is your story? We are connected through stories – they are not incidental to the point we are making, but a vehicle that can open the channel of human interaction that is experienced by everyone in the room – including you! Don't discredit your own connection to the story that has brought you to this presentation. Something hooked you to your science. Bring us along in that story – it will not dumb down your work, but reveal a connection to the work that the audience needs to understand from a first-hand perspective.