Viola Spolin: Games as a Means toward Flow, Empathy, and Finding One’s Truer Self

Abstract: Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi’s flow, mirror neurons and the mirror system, and Antonio Damasio and V.S. Ramachandran’s neuroscience held up against Viola Spolin’s theories on the effects her improv games have on the mind. Spolin’s concepts of a true self and outward focus or point of concentration lay the groundwork for a new theory on improv’s effects on consciousness and cognition.

Viola Spolin is often called the mother of improvisation, so a look at her improv games is a logical starting point for this project. From 1924 to 1927, she studied at Neva Boyd’s Recreational Training School at Chicago’s Hull House. Boyd’s work in recreational games is the inspiration for much of Spolin’s later work in improvisation. Spolin then experimented with her own improvisational games as the teacher and supervisor of creative dramatics on the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project in Chicago. She then continued her teaching in Hollywood in 1946 with her Young Actor’s Company, a school that taught children through games. Her best-known contributions to improvisation, and the platform which allowed her to publish her *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963), were her workshops with adult improvisers at her son Paul Sills’s two theaters, The Compass and then Second City.

What connects Spolin’s work to Boyd’s is that their games require outward focus from participants. Games, as opposed to play, rely on guidelines and a structure, and this structure makes changes in cognition and consciousness possible. Spolin also advocates for her improvisers to not need approval from their teacher or from the audience, and this results in a less self-conscious mode of playing. This same kind of fearless playing is innate in children and is integral to Boyd’s game theory.

**Neva Boyd**

Neva Boyd began her work in recreational games in 1911 when she organized the Chicago School for Playground Workers. She then directed the Department of Recreation in the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy from 1914 to 1920 before starting her own Recreation Training School at Hull House.¹ It is here where she taught Spolin. One of Boyd’s main theories was that play was important in childhood development. Trying to figure out why has relevance to Spolin’s later work as well as to cognition.

Neva Boyd taught at Northwestern University in the Sociology department from 1927 until 1941, and it is likely in this period that her paper “Play—A Unique Discipline” wound up in Spolin’s hands.² Spolin’s notes from her time in Boyd’s classes in the 1920s also prove that Boyd was theorizing about games and play even before Gregory Bateson and certainly well before her *Handbook of Recreational Games* was published in 1945 or her article “Play as a Means of Social Adjustment” appeared in *New Trends*