# Transforming Reference Education through Improv Comedy

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore how the fundamentals of improv comedy could be used to discuss and practice the soft skills necessary for successful reference service interactions. Feedback was collected from a pilot study where students were asked to engage with selected improv comedy activities and then discuss bridges between improv and reference skills. The results presented in this paper support the continued exploration of the efficacy of using the principles of improv comedy to explore effective reference services provision.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

curriculum; education; pedagogy; reference transactions

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

education; improv; reference; soft skills

## INTRODUCTION

The American Library Association (ALA) cites Reference and User Services as the fifth Core Competency of Librarianship, requiring library and information science (LIS) educators to teach library students reference skills. Specifically, it is expected that an individual who graduates with a Masters degree from an LIS program will be able to understand and employ "the methods used to interact successfully with individuals of all ages and groups to provide consultation, mediation, and guidance in their use of recorded knowledge and information" (ALA, 2009, p. 3). This study investigates an innovative way to engage with this topic and explore how to teach the soft skills involved with successfully providing these types of services in a library setting.

Soft skills such as "spontaneity, adaptability, collaboration, and skilled listening" (Watson & Fu, 2020, para. 3) are core skills in improv comedy, where performers must think on their feet and listen closely to have an effective, collaborative experience. Beginning in 2008, the group Medical Improv started using the principles and training techniques from improv to teach physicians better strategies for communicating with patients. Core guidelines for improv such as

make a connection, listen, be flexible, avoid preconceived ideas, respect others' choices, and follow your intuition (Hunter, 2015) have been shown to improve clinicians' communication skills (Hoffman et al, 2008). LIS educators who regularly teach reference skills may look at that list of guidelines and see quite a bit of overlap between effective improv and effective reference.

Improv is not a new concept to bring to the world of librarianship. In a narrative review of LIS research, Azadbakht (2019) noted that scholars and practitioners have published about the use of humor as an instructional strategy since the 1980s. Tewell (2014) discussed connections between improv comedy strategies and library instruction, including knowing how to read an audience, varying teaching methods, relating on a personal level, and using feedback to hone a performance. Improv has also been used to explore effective collaboration in libraries (Dohe & Pappas, 2017), focusing on the interpersonal skills necessary for navigating collaboration in an academic library environment. With this background in mind, the researcher sought to explore how improv comedy strategies could be used to teach reference skills to first-semester LIS graduate students.

## METHODS

In a pilot study, the researcher used short, improv comedy exercises as an active learning activity designed to explore the soft skills that enhance a librarian's reference skills. To begin the in-person class session which took place four weeks into the semester, the instructor discussed common types of reference questions as well as best practices for approaching a reference interview. Then the instructor provided an overview of improv comedy, sharing a TED Talk video about the benefits of improv comedy and asking students to participate first in a class-wide One Word Story Game exercise. Then the students broke into groups of two to practice additional improv comedy exercises. Exercises included the One Word Story Game (Gwinn & Halpern, 2007), Alphabet Game (Nevraumont et al., 2001), and the "Yes And" Game (Gwinn & Halpern, 2007). These activities are designed to practice skills relating to listening, thinking on your feet, and being flexible – all soft skills that relate to what is traditionally highlighted as reference interview best practices.

Following the discussion of reference services and the in-class improv comedy exercises, students were asked to identify bridges between reference and improv. Then students worked in pairs to answer a more traditional library reference question (switching off who would serve as librarian and who would serve as patron). Lastly, the 20 students in the class were asked to provide anonymous warm feedback (i.e., what did you like/learn) and cool feedback (i.e., what did you not like, what would you change) on note cards to evaluate the improv comedy discussions and reference exercises. Note card comments were coded using an open coding approach to identify emerging themes. Quotes that speak to specific takeaways will be highlighted to illustrate key themes. Feedback from both activities will be discussed in detail in the following section.

**RESULTS**

In the class wide discussion of bridges between reference and improv, students cited the following connections: take the time to listen, do not jump to create a response before finished (to avoid giving the wrong response), think on your feet and be flexible, express positivity ("Yes And" puts people at ease), repeat what a person says to help clarify, and make a connection (meet someone where they are at). These soft skills are key to effective reference interviews but can be difficult to convey in a standard class exercise where students practice the reference interview. By marrying discussions of improv comedy with reference skills, students were able to engage and explore these soft skills from a different lens.

Warm feedback responses collected in the anonymous note cards (see Table 1 for examples) included feedback specifically on the activities and the exercises themselves, individual reflections on soft skills and professional development, and connections between improv and reference services. One student upon reflecting on the activities shared "The exercises helped to put into practice what had been a theoretical discussion… seeing how it actually looks, practicing, lets you see how different tools produce different results." Students also reflected on the mechanics of the activities, including praising the structure "the large group exercise broke down barriers and made [the] two person exercise[s] easier" and "I wouldn't have been comfortable acting out … in front of the class." This supports the continued structure of beginning with a class wide activity where each individual contributes minimally (e.g., one word to the whole story) and then transitioning to one-on-one partner activities where the students are asked to stretch further in a more secure feeling set-up. One student even reflected "I can see how to incorporate this kind of experiential learning activity into other educational and professional settings," supporting the use of improv activities as a potential train-the-trainer activity where librarians could use these skill sets with patrons.

|  | **Warm Feedback** | **Cool Feedback** |
|---|---|---|
| **Student A** | I liked how you linked reference interviews to improv. I learned (or was reminded) to be an active listener. | I'm introverted by nature and not into performing or acting at all, so the activities were a little hard and gave me anxiety. But I do see the impact on face-to-face patron interaction! |
| **Student B** | The activities were fun and interactive. I liked the videos. | Maybe one thing that could be different is having different partners each time so we can interact with more people and see how different people interact. |
| **Student C** | I liked that the improv and reference interview activities were practical and employed using those "people skills" that all of our textbooks talk about. Instead of reading about these skills, we were | I don't think I would change much. I suppose I was a little nervous doing the improv type of activities, but the environment was supportive, so it made it pretty easy. |

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| | given the opportunity to put them in action. Along those lines, it helped me to access where I'm at with those skills and where I can grow. It isn't always just about the technical skills! This was the first class that allowed me to learn more about those "soft" skills. | |
| **Student D** | I liked the connection between improv and reference service. I liked learning the tools and being able to use them immediately. | It may help to put the "Yes And" exercise before the ABC exercise to train people to listen before asking them to do an exercise that is internally focused. |
| **Student E** | I thought the activity was fun and engaging! I learned that with practice, it can get easier to "think on your feet." | It felt slightly awkward, but was still fun. I wouldn't change anything - thanks for not making us go to the front of the room! |
| **Student F** | By analogy, I can see how to incorporate this kind of experiential learning activity into other educational and professional settings. | Expertly mediated, in my opinion. Therefore, no critique. I noticed my own inner hesitancy or anxiety during the exercise, but that's part of the learning process. You were gracious to forewarn us about potential feelings of discomfort. |

Table 1. Selected Examples of Warm and Cool Feedback

Students also had exercise-specific feedback. For example, one student noted "I loved the creativity of the ABC exercise" and another specifically highlighted the one word story class exercise as a "helpful and interesting way of looking at the goal" of effective reference library services. Additional feedback explored the effectiveness of using improv to talk about reference services, from the hesitant - "improv is not as scary as I thought it would be" - to the reflective "I liked the way it related to being a librarian and the new perspective it gave me." One student summarized their experience thusly: "I normally dread improv activities because I'm not great at thinking on my feet, but it was a great opportunity to step out of my comfort zone. I liked seeing the connection between improv and reference services - [I] never considered that before - now I want to read [the recommended book] 'Improv Wisdom.'"

Finally, one student in particular noted that the improv activities were an effective way to practice those "'people skills' that all of our textbooks talk about. Instead of reading about these skills, we were given the opportunity to put them into action… It helped me access where I'm at with those skills and where I can grow… This was the first class that allowed me to learn more about those 'soft' skills." This reflection in particular, highlights the unique way that connecting to improv is a way to explore the soft skills of reference in an engaging and personal way.

Much of the cool feedback (n=7) was students saying there was not much they would change. Students did report initial nerves, hesitancy, or anxiety, but reported relief they were not asked to perform in front of the entire group. They also noted it was helpful to have the instructor

"forewarn us about potential feelings of discomfort." While one student noted "thanks for not making us go to the front of the room!", another said "it would be cool if one group were asked to do the reference interaction activity in front of the class so people like me that don't have much experience could see it done well." These suggestions support keeping most of the activities one-on-one but potentially adding an example as part of the reporting back and debriefing process.

Several of the cool feedback suggestions were specifically in regards to the exercises used. One student expressed a desire to try one of the exercises demonstrated in the TED Talk as that "would be less anxiety [producing] but also helpful listening." One student shared they did not care for the ABC game "because it was more of thinking of your next word than actually listening to your partner." Since part of the intention in having students do this exercise in particular was for students to recognize the importance of listening before coming up with a response, perhaps this recognition is part of the learning experience. One student suggested "it may help to put the 'Yes And' exercise before the ABC exercise to train people to listen before asking them to do an exercise that is internally focused," so that could be one approach to address the previous student's concern about not listening to their partner as intently.

A few students commented on aspects regarding instructor facilitation. This included sharing "the environment was supportive" as well as discussing how the groups were structured. Three students expressed a desire to switch up group members during the improv and reference interview exercises: "maybe switch up partners every few exercises. I don't think staying with the same people was bad, but working with different people allows for new connections and new challenges." Rotating partners will be something to explore in future iterations of this class activity.

Six students noted that they were quite nervous when initially hearing there would be improv activities in the classroom. For example, one student shared "I'm introverted by nature and not into performing or acting at all, so the activities were a little hard and gave me anxiety. But I do see the impact on face-to-face patron interaction!" Another added "It brought me out of my comfort zone, but that's a good and necessary thing, so I wouldn't change it." This initial hesitancy was addressed at the beginning of class as a way to recognize the tension that might be present in the room, but it is also affirming to hear that these nerves gave way to an experience that was ultimately rewarding.

## LIMITATIONS

This was a pilot study of an in-person class of 20 students. Additional research will be conducted to explore if this approach continues to be effective with other groups of students. In future semesters this approach will be explored in an online setting to incorporate feedback from pilot student participants and observe the effectiveness of the use of improv comedy to discuss reference services in a synchronous online environment where students will be broken out into smaller meeting rooms within an online meeting platform.

Additionally, the LIS educator and researcher conducting this study does not have a background in improv comedy and does not profess to be an expert in this area. To truly ask students to engage with improv comedy techniques, several sessions would be ideal (as is done with the Medical Improv team). The exercises and activities described in this study are designed to expose students to the soft skills of improv to encourage connections with LIS services but are not designed to create improv comedy experts. It is also important to note that while humor has been used as an effective tools in LIS instruction across the United States (Azadbakht, 2019), applications outside of the United States require cultural sensitivity to explore whether humor would translate to the culture in which the librarian is serving.

**DISCUSSION**

In soliciting students to identify connections between improv and reference, the students demonstrated close engagement with the topic and a recognition of the soft skills required for effective reference services. An instructor can stand up and list these fundamentals for students, but by having students supply them through the creative lens of improv comedy, it is hoped that more personal, close engagement with the topic occurred.

The feedback collected on the note cards highlighted the importance of a supportive environment and effective facilitation. For LIS educators hoping to use improv comedy in the classroom, it is important to address the initial apprehension many students may face when asked to do any kind of performance. Students affirmed the instructor's choice to have the activities happen in small groups without asking students to put on any kind of performance at the front of class. Future iterations of this activity may mix up the order of the improv activities as suggested by student feedback to explore how that might enhance the learning experience.

Students offered reflections on how this connected to their current work as well as how improv comedy exercises provided an opportunity to practice soft skills that are often merely mentioned in LIS instruction. This initial pilot study suggests that using improv comedy may be an effective approach for students to connect with the soft skills necessary for reference service provision.

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