Improv(ing) learning environments: How to Foster Belonging through Play

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Abstract

Applied improvisation is a field in which practitioners apply the principles and practices of improvisational theater to enhance and transform relationships in real-world arenas. Applied improvisation practices have gained popularity in business and professional settings, including professional education such as medical school, law school, and management training. However, currently no research examines how applied improvisation might augment college learning environments by promoting greater student connection, focus, and presence.

This research project examines how principles and practices of improvisation can be used to address two classroom challenges: 1) distraction or lack of focus/attention and 2) disengagement and disconnection from peers that hinders the development of a learning community. First, mental distractions hinder student engagement: from smart phones and online social networks to larger concerns such as academic anxieties (worrying about an upcoming test) or stresses in persona life (i.e. a troubled relationship). These distractions displace students' attention from the immediate task of learning and limit their mental presence in class. Second, learning often remains a radically individual endeavor rather than a process of engaging with and supporting peers in a learning community.

In response to these challenges, I have adapted improvisation games to use as "warm-up" activities in every class session throughout the semester. The goal is to understand whether applied improvisation promotes greater student focus and attention as well as foster connection and trust among learners, both of which result in a stronger learning community. These outcomes are particularly significant at a commuter campus where students find fewer opportunities to develop community and connection.

This poster will report the results of a mixed-methods study featuring both quantitative and qualitative data. Results indicate that applied improvisation improves learning environment factors such as students' sense of community, belonging, focus, and attention.