Whose Classroom is It Anyway? Learning through Improv

Keywords:

Improvisation

Art

Teaching Style

ABSTRACT: Improvisational comedy teaches many of the skills we need as faculty and want our students to have as future managers. First, learn how one professor's approach to teaching has changed dramatically as a result of taking an improv class. Second, share and develop the improvisational techniques currently used in your management classrooms, even if you were unaware you were doing so. Third, engage in a roundtable discussion on how we can all use comedy and improv in our classes even if you don't consider yourself to have a funny bone.

Introduction

Critical skills for professors include being able to make decisions under pressure, being able to creatively brainstorm, and being able to adapt the flow of a class (Bain, 2004). Critical skills for students include being able to creatively brainstorm, being able to collaborate with peers, and being able to adjust to different professors' teaching styles (Tyler, Anderson, & Tyler, 2009). Critical skills for managers include being able to creatively brainstorm, being able to change the strategic direction of a firm, and being able to make decisions under pressure (Pentland, 2012). Business Schools often pay lip service to these skill sets while failing to effectively help any of the stakeholders develop them, but all of these skills are emphasized in one place: improvisational theater (Drinko, 2013).

I will lead an audience-centered discussion on how improv can be used to increase engagement by students in both in-person and online classes. The topic is relevant to instructors of any management discipline at any level of instruction (undergraduate, graduate, or executive). This session responds to two aspects of the call for papers: I will address "relevant issues in management education and/or facilitate effective teaching and learning" by discussing the intersection between current models of business education and improv. To the heart of the theme, Teaching Agents for Positive Change, we will collectively "provide unique ideas for helping students identify their character strengths and put them into action." Accordingly, this session is for anyone and everyone involved in the education of business students at every level.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Research has found that students consider traditional lectures dull and uninformative; hence, faculty are constantly looking for new ways to engage their students and scrambling to

find new modalities to deliver content (Carneiro, 2004). Instructional designers have indicated that the current generation wants multiple streams of information that includes frequent interaction, and that fun activities can enhance inductive reasoning, problem solving, and engagement (Van Eck, 2006). The current generation of students prefer learning through methods with which they are already familiar, especially comedy (Tyler, Anderson, & Tyler, 2009). As technology becomes more ubiquitous, students' attention spans have grown shorter and the demand to keep the classroom entertaining has become paramount (Oblinger, 2012). Numerous business scholars (e.g. Adler, 2006; Taylor & Ladkin, 2017) advocate for inclusion of arts-education in managerial development, while artists have been using improvisational techniques to achieve corporate success (Seifter, 2001). Some business schools, such as MIT, have even started offering an improv training workshop to their MBA students (coursera.org, 2019); however, we have not yet agreed as an academy whether improvisational training would be beneficial for our students. The best way to address the topic may be to examine the discipline from its origins.

Viola Spolin introduced improvisational games to theater students in early twentieth century (Drinko, 2013). She theorized primarily from a cognitive psychology perspective about the benefits to the performers of learning to behave without planning and embracing an unstructured, non-self-conscious form of creating. From an actor's perspective, the value of this skill is primarily learning to live in the moment and to respond to events in a way that appears natural and believable. Accordingly, actors have since been studying improv to sharpen their credibility and creativity. More recently, disciplines outside of the performing arts have borrowed the concept of improvisation as part of their frameworks for both explaining decision-making and honing charismatic behavior (Pentland, 2012). Professional studies researchers have

used the concept of improvisation to help non-performers become more comfortable with unplanned behaviors. For example, Moorman & Miner (1998) opine that improvisation exists at the organizational level and explains how R&D teams can be best prepared to come up with more creative ideas once the right circumstances arise. Leone (2012) similarly examines the extent to which experienced restauranteurs rely on improvisation by recombining old ideas to generate new knowledge. All of these authors call for additional research on how to best train employees to be effective improvisers.

If there may be value for professors, students, and managers to study improv, the next step is a serious discussion about the techniques, the activities, and the potential pitfalls of introducing improvisation into the classroom.

Session Description

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Presentation on the theoretical background of using improvisation in the classroom (5 minutes)
- Demonstrate and play an improv exercise on storytelling (10 minutes)
- Small group discussion of the lessons and implications for teaching. Primary question: What can students take away from this exercise that would be difficult to teach using lecture? (5 minutes)
- Plenary Discussion on how improv fits into the current curriculum (10 minutes)
  - Should we teach improvisation to business students?
    - What are the benefits of studying improv?
    - Are these benefits important enough to take time away from teaching other business concepts?
- If so, how should we go about teaching improv in the classroom? (10 minutes)
  - What are some best practices that have worked for those present?
  - What are the models suggested by improvisational troupes/ instructors?
- What recommendations might you have for using improv in the classroom? What assignments or activities could you imagine based on today's discussion? (5 minutes)
- How will we deal with the inevitable student resistance to learning in new and unfamiliar ways? (5 minutes)
- How will we deal with the inevitable administrative resistance to blurring the lines between academic disciplines? (5 minutes)

Total: 60 minutes

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