Say "Yes and" to students learning teamwork!
Using Improv in the college classroom to build teamwork skills

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork and the ability to work collaboratively on a team are important skills in almost every industry or profession. The use of student teams in college courses is increasing and most academic programs require teamwork as part of the students' academic learning experience. While teamwork and other experiential collaborative learning opportunities are valuable pedagogical strategies, research suggests that little or no student instruction or preparation is provided to teach students how to be an effective team member. Without appropriate preparation from faculty, students focus only on accomplishing the products of the team or attending to the logistical considerations. Students may miss the opportunity to build the collaborative skills and relationships necessary to be an effective team member both in academic programs and in the workplace. The ability to serve as a collaborative team member is viewed as an important attribute in not just academic programs, but valuable in most careers, as well.

Recognition of the value of improvisation or "Improv" is growing in the business world, yet literature on the use of Improv in college courses is limited. Improv is by nature very inclusive and interactive. Improv involves making the best use of the resources already available, especially human resources, by supporting each other and collaborating on ideas.

This paper shares a case study exploring the use of four Improv exercises in a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) course with the intent of enhancing students' learning about teamwork skills. Based on the basic premises of Improv, the exercises are used to prepare students for engaging in effective teamwork. Students enrolled in a Management Theory and Application course are assigned a team project. Prior to working on the projects, students self-select teams and create a Team Agreement. The Team Agreement serves as the entrance to explore essential considerations in teamwork. MBA students participate in four Improv exercises. The Improv exercises, the purpose, and the students' reactions are shared. This paper further discusses the need for continued student preparation in teamwork.

TEAMWORK AND STUDENT PREPARATION

Teamwork and the ability to work collaboratively on a team are important skills in almost every industry or profession. Teamwork and collaborative skills have been listed as essential attributes by many employers (Main 2010) and these skills span throughout many vocations. Much of the literature and current practices related to teamwork have more to do with managing teams' productivity and outputs rather than focusing on providing individual team members with training, experiences or other necessary preparation to perform effectively and collaboratively as a team member (Drake, Goldsmith, & Strachan 2006). Without instructional or experiential preparation in teamwork or collaborative processes, team members may be driven by the task, but not achieve optimal results (West 2000).

Teamwork can be defined as the collective behaviors that enhance the effective functioning and outcomes of the team (Main 2010). One of the most enduring theories related to groups and teams was first identified by Bruce Tuckman in 1965. According to Tuckman, there are sequential stages of group development related to team performance. These stages, forming, storming, norming, and performing correspond to progressions or milestones

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for the team. Teams may or may not proceed through the stages in a sequential pattern. The team's progression, according to Tuckman, relies heavily on the level of the team members' skills to work collaboratively as a member of the team.

The use of student teams in college courses is increasing. Most academic programs require teamwork as part of the students' learning experience. There is growing literature to support that working in teams is a valuable pedagogical strategy and that collaborative learning is extremely effective for a wide range of content and differing learning levels (McKeachie & Svinicki 2006). While teamwork and other experiential learning activities contribute to student learning and retention, it does not necessarily happen automatically. This learning experience is most effective when faculty carefully prepare students for the experience and guide them through the collaborative process (Knowles, 1975; Kolb, 1984; Schroeder, 1993).

While teamwork activities and assignments are increasingly utilized across the curriculum in college programs, few faculty provide preparation or training for students on how to serve as an effective team member (Vik 2001). Too often, faculty emphasize only the outcome of the teamwork and fail to explicitly prepare the students with the necessary collaborative process skills for functioning on a team. According to a survey from San Jose University, faculty routinely explain to the students that learning to work on teams is important. Yet at the same time, 81% of the faculty reported giving "modest, limited, or no instruction" to students about working on teams (Bolton, 1999). Further, Snyder (2009) discussed that professors prepare students for an array of assignments and activities through lecture, reading, discussion, tutorial work and other means but similar preparatory information or activities to teach students how to collaboratively work on a team is not available.

Snyder (2009) found that student preparation to work collaboratively or other lessons related to teaching students about how to engage in teamwork were vastly overlooked. While students routinely receive information to prepare them to complete the content work of the assignments, little if any direction is given on the process or collaborative work. Most students are left to "sink or swim" as most instructors simply assign students to work in teams and provide information and instruction almost exclusively on the expectations of the team products (Vik 2001). Students are expected to learn how to engage in teamwork, yet they are rarely taught.

ENTER IMPROV

Recognition of the value of improvisation or "Improv" is growing in the business world, yet literature on the actual use of Improv in college courses is limited. Improv can be defined as "conception of actions as they unfold drawing on cognitive, affective and social resources" (Kamoche, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002). Keefe (2002) added that improvisation is "making the most of what resources you have".

Improv is by nature very inclusive and interactive. Improv involves making the best use of the resources already available, especially human resources, by supporting and collaborating on ideas. Collaboration, communication, adaptability, and other team-building skills are practiced and enhanced using Improv. Two international Improv companies, Second City and On Your Feet, are experiencing a significant increase in workshop requests from an array of industries and employers including Nike, Disney World, MasterCard, and Deloitte. These requests, representing real world employer needs, are all related to enhancing skills in collaboration, communication, adaptability and creativity.

Introducing Improv in the classroom can be somewhat frightening for both students and faculty. Faculty are used to having control of the classroom and discussions. Students are used to the faculty taking control. With the use of Improv, control is shared and fluid. It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict what will happen during Improv exercises. Still, it is extremely important to prepare the students for the experience by sharing some of the basic premises or guidelines for maximizing the use of improvisation.

Basic Improv guidelines, according to Gee and Gee (2011) include:

- "Yes, and"

"Yes, and" means accepting and building on the ideas of others. It is considered the core and most important element of Improv and provides the foundation for moving all ideas and actions forward. When an idea is put forward by a team member, other members accept the idea and add other information and insights to move the idea forward.

- Support and Celebrate the Contributions of Others

Supporting and celebrating the contributions of others is about helping all the members of the team look and feel good about their contributions. This is done through both verbal and nonverbal communication. When team members feel encouraged by each other,

rather than competitive with each other, creativity and collaboration are unleashed.

- Suspend Judgments

Being open to new ideas and viewing ideas in novel ways facilitates moving ideas forward. Criticism of ideas holds them back. An Improv mindset is supportive and nonjudgmental. A supportive environment can uncover new insights and new energy.

- Take Risks

Improv can push individuals and teams out of their comfort zone. They have to try to do things in new ways. These opportunities can promote both personal and team growth. Approaching tasks from the same way leads to the same results. Encouraging and supporting risk-taking and relying on the ideas of someone else can lead to improved results. All learning and insights are viewed as success. The only failure in Improv is to not try.

- Display Enthusiasm

Energy and enthusiasm are contagious. Displaying high energy and enthusiasm is a choice. Choosing to display high energy and enthusiasm requires conscious commitment. Model high energy and request team members to do the same.

According to Berk and Trieber (2009) improvisation is a valuable teaching tool in the classroom and has many benefits including promoting interdependence and trust among students. Further, improvisation exercises actively engage students in the learning process and this opportunity fosters deeper learning.

FACULTY PREPARATION

Saint Xavier University is a nationally recognized mid-sized private institution serving more than 5,000 students. Saint Xavier University's mission is to educate men and women to search for truth, to think critically, to communicate effectively and to serve wisely and compassionately in support of human dignity and the common good. Effective communication, serving wisely and compassionately is at the core of successful teamwork. Like many institutions of higher learning, Saint Xavier University, and especially Saint Xavier University's Graham School of Management, requires students to work in teams in several courses.

As faculty within the Graham School of Management, we want our students to be skilled practitioners in the workplace. Thus, in addition to learning the content of the courses, and as part of our mission, we want to prepare our students to be responsible leaders and engage in effective

management practices. Effective management practices would require skillful teamwork capabilities.

In an effort to provide an opportunity for our students to learn more about teamwork and collaborative skills, we decided to incorporate some Improv exercises into selected courses within the Graham School of Management. To prepare ourselves to utilize Improv for these learning experiences for our students, we first completed several levels of Improvisation courses through Chicago's Second City School of Improvisation.

IMPROV IN THE MBA

Most of the students in Saint Xavier University's Graham School of Management Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program are working professionals and take MBA classes in the evening and / or weekend. The MBA program generally takes two or three years to complete, depending on the students' course load. Management Theory and Application is one of the first required courses our graduate students take as part of the MBA program. Because it is an entry course for the MBA program, the Management Theory and Application course appeared to be a good choice to first incorporate the Improv exercises.

The purpose of the Management Theory and Application course is to examine the effective management of people in organizational settings. The students in the Management Theory and Application course are often current, new or aspiring managers hoping to improve their professional and managerial skills. Within this course, one of pedagogical strategies involves requiring students to work in self-selected teams, to establish team goals and guidelines, then evaluating the team's performance.

On the first evening of class, along with receiving the course syllabus, students were introduced to the details of the major course project. To complete this course project, they need to select team members within the first two weeks of class. Students openly or privately complained that working on a team can be overly challenging. Many commented they would prefer to work independently. There is a perception that working on a team can decrease their ability to be productive. At the time the team project is introduced, we also discussed the parameters of evaluating teams and the team experience. We discussed the importance of creating a "Team Agreement" that would include how to accomplish the work product and also establish a process to be collaborative, supportive and to address problems. Students are required to create a "Team Agreement" with their team and submit it before the third week of class, along with their team roster. The students use their Team Agreement as the framework for evaluating the team experience at the end of the term.

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At this point, students are not given much additional direction about what should be included in the Team Agreement. The submitted Team Agreements generally contain only outcome, logistical and operational information. For example, the Team Agreements asserted that the members would complete the team project by the due date, stated the requirement of members to attend team meetings, provided specific commitments for reading schedules with dates, and often identified an acceptable time frame for responding to emails or other contacts. Students did not list any process or interaction considerations in their Team Agreements.

By the third week of class, all student teams have submitted their Team Agreements. The students are asked if they believe their Team Agreements are complete, comprehensive and will assist them in having an improved team experience. They all quickly agree their Team Agreements are very comprehensive. It is at this point, the Improv exercises are introduced. Two exercises are introduced that same evening and two more are introduced over the next two class meetings.

LEARNING ABOUT TEAMWORK THROUGH IMPROV

No, but or Yes, and…?

The first Improv exercise is called "No, but or Yes, and?". It is built on a combination of three of the Improv guidelines of "Yes and, Support and Celebrate the Contributions of Others, and Suspend Judgments" as described earlier. This exercise happens in two parts. In the first part, students, working within their teams, are assigned a role. One student will be asked to propose ideas that they may be able to use for their project. Another student will be asked to listen to the ideas, and find reasons to critique or reject every idea that is proposed. No matter what the idea is, they will critique and reject it. The remaining student or two serves in an observer role. Observers will report to the entire class on what they viewed at the completion of the exercise. This first part of the exercise runs for about five minutes. At the end of the five minutes, observers report what happened in their teams. Typically, they describe the decrease in energy after the first few ideas are proposed and "shot down". They describe that the team began feel tension and there was a sense of being "stuck". Frequently, without being asked, the students who were assigned the role of proposing ideas volunteer that they felt both defeated and slightly angry, even though they knew their team member had been assigned this role of rejecting ideas. Comments generally include "It made me want to stop trying" and "it became really draining".

In the second part of the exercise, there is one significant difference. The students who were assigned the roles of critiquing or rejecting ideas in the exercise now are asked to respond "Yes" to each idea proposed, articulate something that they really liked about the idea, and then offer something additional ("and") that would build on the idea. Again, the exercise runs for about five minutes. The energy level in room is noticeably different from the first part of the exercise. Instead of winding down on their own, I have to stop the students and remind them it is time to share with the entire class. Students commented "This was fun, I really enjoyed it and we got some great ideas for our project." The observers describe how the energy in the team increased. Sometimes, observers admitted to stepping out of their role by offering ideas too. As one observer shared, "I got caught up in the momentum". The students assigned to the role of proposing ideas commented that it was a much more positive and energizing experience. In the second part, they had even more ideas to propose, comparing that in the first part of the exercise when they described they were "running out of ideas".

As a debriefing, the entire class engaged in a discussion about how their experiences in this Improv exercise related to serving on a team. We discussed what behaviors, orientations, and words facilitate the team moving forward and which of these impede a team's progress. Students are asked if they had included any guidelines or considerations for facilitating the team's process in their team agreements. Most students readily admitted they did not.

Tell Me What Happened!

Another Improv exercise "Tell Me What Happened!" is built on the Improv guideline "Display Enthusiasm". This exercise has two parts. In the first part of the exercise, students are asked to keep silent and to visualize something that had happened to them in the last year that had made them extremely happy and to also visualize something that had happened in the last year that they found very frustrating. In the second part of the exercise, students are then asked to break into pairs within their team and share just one of those two experiences with a partner. However, they must remain silent and use only nonverbal communication to share their experience. They are given five minutes to share their experience with their partner, each taking a turn. At the end, each of the partners will then be asked to share as much as they can about their partner's experience.

Without exception, each student was accurate in identifying if their partner was conveying a happy experience or a frustrating experience. Further, students are often able to perceive actual facts about the situation. For example, students could understand if their partner had a disagreement at work or had experienced the excitement of a new addition to the family. No words were necessary for students to convey this.

As a class, we discussed how none of these experiences shared had actually happened during our class time, yet, we were able to bring out the appropriate emotion, energy and enthusiasm to make our experiences real to our partners. We were able to make our partner see we were happy or frustrated. Our displayed emotions, energy and enthusiasm are choices we make. We can manipulate them to fit our needs. We also discussed how important nonverbal communication can be and how expressive it is to make appropriate use of eye contact. As one student commented, "when my partner kept eye contact with me I knew she was really focused on me and trying to understand me." The energy and enthusiasm facilitated the ability to communicate and share an experience. Students are asked if they included any considerations about enthusiasm or energy in their team agreements. They respond they did not, but acknowledge it would be beneficial to add considerations related to being enthusiastic about the work, being open to, and accepting of ideas.

Make a Change!

Another worthwhile Improv exercise, "Make a Change!" underscores the interdependence of members on a team and is built on the Improv guideline of "Taking Risks". In this exercise, students standing in their teams form two lines facing each other. Team members are in the same line next to each other and students in the class are across from them. The two separate lines are asked to identify the person directly across from them in the opposite line. The person across from them is now their "partner". Partners are asked to take note of each other's appearance for thirty seconds, and then they turn their backs to the opposing line. While their backs are turned from the other line, students are instructed to change four things about their appearance. They have thirty seconds to do this, and then they are to turn and face their partners and describe what changes have been made. This activity is repeated several times. Students are instructed that the same change to their appearance cannot be repeated. For example, students cannot simply keep rolling up and down their shirtsleeves. Once done, they need to find something else to change.

In the first two or three rounds of this exercise, students easily find things to change about their appearance. They remove glasses, roll up shirtsleeves, change the part in their hair, kick off a shoe, untie their tie, unbutton a cardigan sweater, etc. However, by the fourth or fifth round, students begin run out of ideas. Some students will comment "there is nothing else to change". The exercise continues although the students' energy is beginning to lag. At some point soon, one of the students will suddenly turn to a team member and ask to borrow an item to change their appearance. A team begins to exchange glasses and cardigans and realizes they have just opened a wealth of new possibilities among the team members. When that happens, all of the students excitedly begin exchanging items to change their appearance. The students' energy is high again. That becomes the last round of the exercise.

In debriefing the exercise, students are asked how this exercise related to teamwork. Comments included "Trying to do it by myself was hard" and "Working with others gave us a lot more possibilities, we all had something different to add". As one student shared, "It made me think that I need to be more mindful of reaching out to others rather than always solving things on my own."

Fill in the Space!

An Improv exercise that builds on the guidelines of Support and Celebrate the Contributions of Others and Taking Risks is called "Fill in the Space". For this exercise, students are in their teams but interact with members of the entire class. Chairs and tables are moved to the side so the center of the classroom is empty. A designated area at the center of the classroom is described to the students as some common place, for example, the top of an empty desk. Students are asked, in teams to represent something that may be on top of the desk. However, once an item is represented, it cannot be duplicated. If one student is a "pencil", no other student can be a "pencil". Students in teams represent a 'theme'. If the first member of their team is a "coffee cup", the next member of the team must represent something related to a "coffee cup". Only the first member of the team is allowed to speak. The first member of the team is allowed to state, in one word, the item they are representing. Other members of the team silently support the initial idea of their team member. One by one, the students move to the designated area and physically represent items. After all of the students are representing items and placed within in the designated area, each student then states what item they represent. If the first team member was a "coffee cup", the second team member may be a "saucer", lying on the floor next to the "coffee cup" and another team member may be a "spoon" leaning next to the "coffee cup" and another team member may be a "sugar bowl" standing next to the "coffee cup".

This exercise is both mentally and physically creative. Students have to come up with an idea and physically represent an idea in a space. This pushes students out of their comfort zone but frequently ends with students laughing. After the exercise, students discuss what they learned about teamwork. Common observations include "I had

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to build on an idea that I did not come up with, but it worked" and "I had to dig deep and then put everything I had into it to make it believable". There are also some especially insightful observations, for example, "Once a team member made a decision, it may use up a lot of the team's energy to try to take it in another direction. You have to ask if it is worth it to change direction, or is the energy better used trying to make that decision as good as possible."

TEAM AGREEMENTS AND TEAM EVALUATIONS

As noted earlier, students submitted their Team Agreements prior to participating in any Improv exercises. After the first two Improv exercises, students were given the option to revise their Team Agreements and resubmit them the following week. Every team chose to revise their Team Agreements and added new considerations related to process and interaction. For example, instead of just listing that the "team members will attend team meetings" they now include " team members will be open to and supportive of ideas from all team members" and "team member will bring their course materials and their energy to team meetings". Students are becoming aware that being an effective team member requires more than simply showing up at the meeting.

At the end of term, students individually submit a written summary and evaluation of their team members' contributions and their team experience. In previous years, students' comments would mostly be somewhat measured and narrow. Most students would report their teams were "fine" or "worked as expected." They evaluated the team based almost exclusively on deadlines, commitments, and outcomes. Occasionally, they commented that one specific team member was "difficult" or did not keep some of the assignment commitments.

Since utilizing Improv, the narratives appear to be more inclusive and positive. Their framework for evaluating the team and the team experience is broader. While there are still occasional comments about deadlines and assignment commitments, there are also new comments emerging. Comments related to listening to and learning from each other, building on each others' skills, and contributing to the team meetings being energizing and motivating, are much more frequent. As noted earlier, the majority of the MBA students are working professionals. Some of the students have commented that they suggested the use of some of these exercise at their workplace to work better as a department or professional team.

LEARNING FROM IMPROV

Participating in these Improv exercises, along with the debriefing discussions, provided students with an opportunity to view the importance of process and collaborative issues in teamwork. Process and collaborative considerations should compliment, not supplant, the operational and logistical issues students identify as key teamwork considerations.

Providing preparation and practice for students prior to working in teams appears to have helped the MBA students enjoy a more positive team experience. Further, after participating in these exercises, the students broadened their view on the considerations and competencies necessary for effective teamwork. Having the opportunity to both practice and reflect on these skills provided the students a new way to approach teamwork not only in the classroom, but in their professional world, as well. According to Gee and Gee (2011), the most important learning from Improv can take place through the questions that connect the competencies in Improv to the participants' work life. The real life connections will encourage students to continue to hone and apply these new skills.

Further exploration and research is necessary to know definitively if the preparation and practice in teamwork can lead to better team performance and an improved team experience. Additional exploration will be needed to include undergraduate students. However, for the immediate future, it may be a good idea to say "Yes and" to students learning about teamwork.

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