The flourishing classroom: lessons from improvisational theater

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Abstract
Purpose – This essay articulates the vision of a flourishing classroom, which arguably is the ultimate goal of a positive approach to management education. By demonstrating how improvisational theater is the epitome of a flourishing ensemble, this essay proposes that there are some lessons educators can glean from improvisational theater in order to achieve a flourishing classroom. The applications, benefits and challenges of applying improvisational theater in the classroom are also discussed.

Design/methodology/approach – This essay articulates the vision of a flourishing classroom, which arguably is the ultimate goal of a positive approach to management education. By demonstrating how improvisational theater is the epitome of a flourishing ensemble, this essay proposes that there are some lessons educators can glean from improvisational theater in order to achieve a flourishing classroom. The applications, benefits and challenges of applying improvisational theater in the classroom are also discussed.

Findings – Improvisational theater can shed some light on teaching pedagogies within the classroom. Building trust in the classroom community, framing failure as learning opportunities, and promoting the improvisational mindset can enable students to learn better.

Originality/value – This essay articulates the vision of a flourishing management classroom, which arguably is the ultimate goal of a positive approach to management education. By demonstrating how improvisational theater is the epitome of a flourishing ensemble, this essay proposes that there are some lessons management educators can glean from improvisational theater in order to achieve a flourishing management classroom. The applications, benefits and challenges of applying improvisational theater in the classroom are also discussed.

Keywords Education, Improvisation, Pedagogy, Positive education

Paper type Viewpoint

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly reshaped education systems worldwide, and highlighted the importance of mental health issues in students (Arslan et al., 2021). There is a strong call for approaches to develop and foster students’ strengths and skills for happiness and psychological, social and emotional health in educational contexts. Amidst how education systems are evolving to develop students who can adapt to macro changes in the environment, the importance of positive education in the classroom environment has become more crucial than ever (Morgan and Simmons, 2021).

This essay provides a perspective on what a flourishing classroom, grounded on positive psychology principles (e.g. Oades et al., 2011) looks like both in virtual and face-to-face classrooms. The goal of this essay is draw on the features and philosophy of improvisational theater, and provide insights on how educators can create an ensemble culture, encourage flourishing within the classrooms and enable collaborative learning, regardless of whether it is in a virtual or face-to-face environment. Moving beyond individual positive educational interventions (e.g. Allison et al., 2021), the focus on this paper reains in on collective and sociologically based interventions, that enable all students to flourish, by building on the collective well-being of the group (Lobman, 2018).

Positive education in classrooms
Positive education has been defined in a number of ways. Oades et al. (2014) described it as “the development of educational environments that enable the learner to engage in established curricula in addition to knowledge and skills to develop their own and others’ wellbeing” (p. 432). Importantly, and directly related to the premise of this essay, Norrish et al. (2013) described positive education as “bringing together the science of positive psychology
with best-practice teaching to encourage and support schools and individuals within their communities to flourish” (p. 148).

The evolution of positive education has gone through three distinctive waves (Kern et al., 2020). The first wave arose from discontent over traditional psychology and focuses on building social-emotional skills and promoting positive behavior among students (e.g. Seligman et al., 2009). The second wave of positive education saw a shift towards more systemic integration of positive psychology principles within educational systems and institutions (Kern et al., 2020). Concrete examples of positive psychological interventions in the classrooms that have proven to increase positive emotions and engagement include gratitude journals (Waters, 2011), and mindfulness training exercises (Oades et al., 2011).

The emerging third wave goes beyond the individual and embraces complexity with a broadening focus that encompasses collective flourishing (Lomas et al., 2020). This led Kern et al. (2020) to develop the systems informed positive education. The premise of the systems informed positive education is that classrooms are dynamic systems and needs to be addressed holistically.

**Theoretical foundation of a flourishing classroom**

The theoretical foundation of systemic model of a flourishing classroom is built on systems theory (Kern and Taylor, 2021; Allison et al., 2021). Firstly, systems theory emphasizes viewing entities as interconnected systems rather than isolated parts (e.g. Von Bertalanffy, 1972). In the context of education, this means recognizing the interplay between various factors influencing students’ well-being and learning outcomes, and acknowledging the importance of addressing multiple dimensions of well-being, including emotional, social, physical and cognitive aspects.

Systems theory also highlights the dynamic interactions and feedback loops that occur within systems. Systems-informed positive education recognizes the importance of these interactions and seeks to cultivate feedback loops that enhance well-being and learning outcomes (Kern et al., 2020). Systems theory emphasizes the adaptive capacity of systems to respond to changes in their environment. In education, this involves creating flexible and adaptive learning environments that can accommodate diverse student needs and promote resilience. Systems theory underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within a larger social system. In the context of education, this highlights the importance of promoting collective well-being and fostering positive relationships within school communities. Positive education encourages the cultivation of empathy, cooperation, and prosocial behavior, which contribute to a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

**Features of a flourishing classroom**

According to King et al. (2018), definitions of flourishing have increased, but conceptualizations remain focused on the individuals. The positive psychology literature also limits the focus of flourishing to psychological well-being by defining flourishing as the presence of positive feelings and positive functioning (Huppert and So, 2013). Keyes (2007) proposed that flourishing requires an individual to display at least one high-level indicator of hedonic wellbeing and at least six high-level indicators of positive functioning, such a purpose in life, autonomy, social acceptance or social contribution. Extending flourishing to a collective phenomenon, I define flourishing as a “situation where a group as a collective is independently and interdependently feeling good and functioning well” (Allison et al., 2021).

**Classroom cohesion**

Classroom cohesion refers to ‘feelings of closeness and caring shared by classroom members. A cohesive classroom is one where members spend time together, support and help each other
Research has shown that classrooms with high cohesion create emotionally, mentally and physically safe spaces, where most students feel a sense of belonging, connection and acceptance (Quinlan et al., 2015). To achieve high levels of classroom cohesion, support needs to be granted to everyone. For instance, there has to be vertical cohesion (educator to students) and social cohesion through peer to peer encouragement and support (Dion, 2000).

To attain high classroom cohesion, there also needs to be emotional bonding between all members of the classroom where students displaying care and concern for each other, while the educator demonstrates care and concern for the students too.

**Classroom flexibility**
According to Allison et al. (2021), flexibility refers to a classroom that is adaptable to student needs. For this kind of flexibility to occur, educators need to be cognizant of how students respond to different types of activities and adapt accordingly (Westwood, 2018). At the same time educators can allow for the flexibility of the class taking a slightly different direction, while not straying too far from the main topic, depending on student interests and questions. Part of classroom flexibility also involves giving voice to students that allows for student participation and meaningful decision-making (Reiss, 2018). This can come in the form of discussion questions to pursue in class, or types of assignments students would like to partake in.

Besides being adaptable and flexible to student needs, there has to be a space where negotiation can occur. According to Herrmann (2018), negotiation is about ‘solving complex problems that require the cooperation of others’ (p. 1). To attain better student learning and outcomes, educators need the cooperation of students, and students need it from each other as well. This corresponds with collaborative learning where everyone is actively involved with solving a common problem or resolving a discussion dilemma together (Dillenbourg, 1999).

**Classroom communication**
Healthy and positive classroom communication is vital to the flourishing of a classroom (Allison et al., 2021). It relates to the capacity for students and educators to express their thoughts and feelings and practice their active listening skills. Listening involves educators hearing students without interrupting, and looking at students directly when they are speaking.

Students should also practice active listening and communication skills when interacting with their peers. This involves staying open-minded when hearing out the thoughts, questions and points raised by other students in class.

**Classroom wellbeing**
Finally, a flourishing classroom enables the well-being of not just individual students, but all members of the classroom including the educator (Allison et al., 2021).

First, students and educators need to have the capacity to recognize, utilize and develop their specific talents (Waters, 2011). Research has shown that the strength-based approach leads to improved wellbeing outcomes, including, psychological well-being, vitality, positive affect, engagement, achievement and decreased stress (Quinlan et al., 2015). The explicit teaching of strengths has been shown. When instructors focus on student’s strengths, assets and abilities, it makes it possible to identify the core elements that enable students to flourish and thrive (Brunzell et al., 2015). Going beyond the individual focus on individual strength-based approaches, the strength-based approach has been linked to social skills and pro-social behavior in children and adolescents (Tayyab et al., 2013). A flourishing classroom system involves teachers and students using their own strengths, seeing the strengths in others and mobilizing group-level strengths to achieve a common goal (Allison et al., 2021).
A flourishing classroom also places an emphasis on present-focused attention (Allison et al., 2021). Studies find that when attention is continuously present-focused, people are more likely to feel happy (e.g., Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010).

Relational capacity is another important element that needs to be present for a classroom to flourish, ultimately, leading to the well-being of everyone in the classroom. Relational capacity refers to the ability to develop and sustain positive and beneficial relationships with others (Adame, 2022). This includes skills such as having the capacity to understand and manage social aspects of life successfully to develop nourishing connection with others. In the classroom setting, this implies positive relationships not only between the educator and students, but also amongst students themselves.

Lastly, a flourishing classroom is where members of the classroom are able to cope and have the ability to bounce back from being thrown off balance (Rajaei et al., 2016). This means that students and educators alike are able to have coping skills to deal with adverse events both in their lives and in the classroom by restructuring thoughts, self-administering first aid and help-seeking outcomes such as resilience (Gheshlagh et al., 2017).

Improvisational theater as a flourishing ensemble

What is improvisational theater

Now that we have a clearer picture of what a flourishing classroom entails, let us take a closer look at what improvisational theater is about. We will examine how improvisational theater is a flourishing ensemble from which we can draw lessons from.

Frost and Yarrow (2007) provided a general definition of improvisation that applies to the various roles of improvisation as training tool, play-writing device, or actual onstage performance. The core idea of improvisation is the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text); to do this spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one’s environment.

In fact, improv is a form of collaborative performance (Halpern et al., 1994) where process and product co-occur (Sowden et al., 2015). This is in contrast to scripted theater, whereby much of the play’s creative choices (e.g., writing a script, casting actors) are preplanned and may be made by designated individuals (e.g., the playwright) rather than collaboratively.

Importantly, underpinning improv is the philosophy of “yes, and . . .” (e.g., Johnstone, 2012). This philosophy of having a “yes, and” mindset emphasizes the need for improvisers to agree on the reality of a scene in order to move forward in it (Besser et al., 2013). Each improviser accepts the information their partner offers (the “yes,”) and adds more to it (the “and”) (Hines, 2016).

In practical terms, in improv theater, there is freedom for actors to improvise the strands of the plot and script, implying that every performance is both the premier and the closing show, and will never be seen on stage again. In general, improvisational actors are given a theme by the audience and have to improvise around it. For example, the presenter may ask the audience to suggest a location where the next scene should take place, and this location then serves as a guideline or inspiration for the actors’ scenes. These scenes will often also be accompanied by music improvised and played live, and since the actors are creating freely on the spot, they are effectively the authors, directors, dramatic advisers, and actors all at the same time.

Improvisational theater: a flourishing ensemble

Distilling the essence of the elements and ingredients behind a successful improvisational theater ensemble by reviewing the following writers of improvisational theater, Spolin (1999), it becomes apparent that there are many parallels and similarities between a flourishing classroom and flourishing improvisational theater.
According to Spolin (1999), improvisational actors need to have strong emotional bonds between one another and feel safe to express themselves freely and without judgment from others. In other words, there has to be cohesion within the ensemble. Related to the idea of cohesion, mutual support is also necessary in a successful improvisational theater ensemble in that all actors must take responsibility for the group, and ensure that the goal is the good of the group as a whole. Actors should never abandon their partner or others on stage, but support all on stage as best as they can.

Flexibility, which is required in a flourishing classroom is also a key ingredient of successful improvisational theater ensembles. All improvisational theater actors should be flexible enough to let go of their own agenda, ego or preconceptions and adapt to what has been offered to them from other actors. They need to be able to go with the flow and remain flexible and adaptable at all times. At the same time, all improvisational theater actors need to practice active listening and respond authentically to what has been presented to them.

Related to the idea of strength-based approach in positive psychology and a flourishing classroom, improvisational actors have to find the strength and key essence in the ideas and offers presented to them by others on stage and work with that. No idea is a bad idea, and all actors need to have the capacity to work with the strength that lies within each idea or offer presented.

Besides being able to respond constructively to their surroundings, prompts, and other actors, improvisational actors must be able to manage their own internal emotions well too. For instance, they need to be able to put aside their own anxieties, fears and egos for the impromptu story to progress, and for the ultimate success of the improvisational performance.

Just as a flourishing classroom requires paying attention to the present, the capacity to stay in the present is key to improvisational theater as well. One of the key elements of improvisational theater is staying present by focusing solely on what is happening in the present. This then allows actors to be able to respond appropriately and add value to the offers and ideas presented to them by others.

The foundation of a flourishing classroom is built on solid relationships. Similarly, successful improvisational theater ensembles are built on positive, solid, trusting relationships between all actors. They trust that everyone has their back, and there is psychological safety within the ensemble.

The last key element of a flourishing classroom is the concept of resilience – the ability to bounce back from adverse events. In improvisational theater, actors have to have resilience. When they make a perceived “mistake”, or is taken by surprise by the turn of events, they need to know how to bounce back and practice resilience to keep the show going.

All in all, we can see how the elements required in a flourishing classroom are the very ingredients of successful improvisational theater. This leads us to the question of, given that improvisational theater is the epitome of a flourishing group, what lessons can management education take away from improvisational theater?

Lessons from improvisational theater

“Yes, and . . .”
As alluded to in the earlier section on improvisational theater, the “yes, and” principle is the golden rule underlying all successful improvisational performances (Johnstone, 2012). According to this principle, actors are to practice the essence behind “yes, and . . .” philosophy and accept and build on other actor’s ideas and offers. They need to ensure that they are not denying or blocking others ideas, and instead, adding value onto what has been said or offered to them (e.g. Spolin, 1999; Johnstone, 2012).
Applied to the classroom setting, it implies that educators have to add value to student queries, comments and ideas. This does not mean that educators have to agree with what has been presented to them by students. Rather, it means that educators have to respond in a constructive way; first by appreciating what has been shared, then responding truthfully to that idea or comment. For instance, educators can first acknowledge the essence and strength of what has been shared, then correct the thinking or idea if it is not of the right direction. If students share a valid point, educators can further elaborate on it by giving examples, or sharing other related valid points to widen students’ perspectives. The key goal is to move the discussion forward in a way that enhances student learning.

Similarly, for students to practice the “yes, and . . .” principle, it means that they have to keep an open mind to all perspectives that are shared. Rather than rejecting an idea that is anti-thesis to their own, they are to appreciate the value in the idea shared by others then respond by engaging truthfully with that idea. It means that rather than shutting down others idea, students are bringing the discussion forward by stacking ideas and statements, constructively building up the learning experience for all.

Trusting yourself and others
Trust is another important element of improvisational theater that can be applied to classroom setting. In the context of improvisational theater, trust has to apply both to the self, and to others as well (e.g. Spolin, 1999; Johnstone, 2012). When an improvising actor gets into difficulty, they trust that someone will come to their rescue, and take what they have offered and develop it further (e.g. Frost and Yarrow, 2015).

Applying this concept to the classroom, what this trust means is that students and educators have to come from the basic trust that they themselves have value to add to the classroom discourse and that everyone else has something valuable to add as well. The essence of this trust is also in that even though there may be debates and disagreement in class, there is the trust that no ill-intention is involved, and that no one will take advantage of someone else’s vulnerability, but rather, the intention is to further the learning of all in the classroom.

No mistakes, only gifts and opportunities
For a successful improvisational performance to take place, one has to accept the simple philosophical position that there are no mistakes, only gifts and opportunities (e.g. Spolin, 1999). In practical terms, this means that no mistakes could be made on the improvisational theater stage, in that there are only unexpected turns in the scene, or spontaneous reactions to the lines and offers of other actors. A seemingly “wrong” line, word, or reaction could be an opportunity to take the scene or storyline in a different direction. This philosophical position must be internalized in all improv actors for them to be able to act freely and spontaneously on stage, and not to be gripped by fear of saying the wrong thing.

This idea that there are no mistakes, only gifts and opportunities is crucial for students to grasp in a psychologically positive classroom. This tenet will free the students’ fear of asking the wrong question, or coming up with the wrong answer. Rather, the educator and other students will provide a psychologically safe space, whereby any question or comment a student makes is seen as a gift and learning opportunity.

From competitive orientation to collaborative learning orientation
To build a flourishing classroom, there has to be a shift from a competitive mindset and practice, to one that is learning-oriented. According to Gonzalez et al. (2004), the classroom may be a competitive environment that underscores a teaching-oriented perspective, whereby students compete with each other to come up with the right answer. In such an
environment, students view the classroom as a zero-sum game, where they are scoring points by coming up with the “right” answer.

This competitive mindset is essentially the opposite of the improv mindset (Aylesworth, 2008). To build a psychologically positive classroom culture founded on the principles of improv theater, the educator needs to shift students to the learning-oriented perspective, where the classroom atmosphere is cooperative, rather than competitive. In particular, students need to internalize the core philosophy of improv that all actors are equally important and relevant on the stage. In the classroom, this means that all students are not individuals in competition for better grades. Rather, they are actors within the context of the classroom, collaborating and co-creating new insights and knowledge by building on one another’s perspectives, questions and answers.

Implications for educators and students

**Educator as improviser**

To approach teaching with a positive orientation and to create a flourishing classroom, in particular, to respond to students’ strength and viewpoints, educators need to view teaching as a form of improvisation, and also equip themselves with specific skills. Recent scholars have proposed that teaching is inherently an improvisational act that requires the educator to think on their feet and spontaneously respond to classroom dynamics, student queries and contribution to classroom discourse (e.g. Sawyer, 2004a, b). In fact, Sawyer (2004a) has redefined the teaching-as-performance metaphor as teaching-as-improvisational performance: “Conceiving of teaching as improvisation emphasizes the interactional and responsive creativity of a teacher working together with a unique group of students. In particular, effective classroom discussion is improvisational, because the flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all participants, both teachers and students” (pp. 12–13).

What this means for educators is that they need to know how to build on the strengths of students’ perspectives shared and respond constructively. Rather than negating or discounting students’ views, educators need to know how to build on them and expand possibilities, just as how improv actors build on the unanticipated lines of their co-actors.

What this requires is for educators to have learnable repertoires. Actors in improv theater need a repertoire of a body of texts and different ways of acting, incorporating them into a performance that is continually responsive to the audience and to new situations or events (Borko and Livingston, 1989). Similarly, in teaching, educators need a repertoire of examples, educational methods such as narratives, pictures, figures, activities, gestures (Holdhus et al., 2016). Shulman (1986, p. 203) describes repertoires as a teacher’s total collection of resources as “a veritable armamentarium of alternative forms of representation, some of which derive from research whereas others originate in the wisdom of practice”. Repertoire also includes personal experiences, and knowledge of a non-curricular kind obtained from different sources (Holdhus et al., 2016).

This repertoire plays an important role in explaining, introducing or demonstrating a concept, theory, a way of working or a problem (Holdhus et al., 2016). To be successful in enabling learning in the classroom, the educator needs to use the most “the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations” (Shulman, 1986). Educators need to be able to improvise professionally.

Applied to the positive perspective on teaching, it means that educators need to know how to skillfully use their repertoire to build on the strengths of students. A repertoire is a prerequisite for the use of the golden moments that may occur in classroom dialogues during a lesson, and also for the teacher’s ability to be able to change a planned structure out of a perceived need in the situation.

While teaching as improvisation suggests that educators need to learn to be spontaneous, adapt and respond in appropriate ways to classroom dynamics and student reactions, this is
often underpinned by structure and design (e.g. Holdhus et al., 2016). Improvisation in both music and theater requires awareness and skill in planning and structural thinking (Holdhus et al., 2016). Similarly, and importantly educators need to improvise within the constraints of curricular frameworks with the focus on students’ learning.

**Students as improviser**

To participate in a flourishing classroom, students play an important role as well. According to Berliner (1994), “Improvisation involves reworking recomposed material, designs in relations to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation” (p. 241).

As improvisers, it implies that students have to be prepared to do their preparation work before class. This includes reading pre-class readings, watching pre-class videos, and engaging in pre-class activities that the instructor has designed. When students do the above, they are expanding the repertoire from which they can draw on and build upon during in-class sessions. It also implies that students have to have the ability to draw associations between what is being taught and discussed in class, with their own lived experiences. While students may come to class unprepared, the improviser mindset for students is still just as crucial (Dudeck and McClure, 2021). This calls for students to adopt an attitude that allows them to embrace opportunities, ideas and experiences with openness and curiosity. The improv mindset also encourages students to be comfortable with uncertainty, to be able to adjust their actions and responses in real-time by being adaptable. Students also need to practise creativity, by exploring new ideas, perspective and possibilities. The crux of the improv mindset also involves collaboration, and thus students need to practise presence, active listening, empathy, cooperation and support for others’ ideas. The improv mindset also entails being fully present in the moment, attentive to surroundings and fellow students. It involves letting go of distractions, judgments, and preconceived notions, turning into the present experience with focus and mindfulness.

**Applications of improv activities in education**

In recent years, educators from different fields have started to incorporate improvisational theater principles and activities in their classes. For instance, the use of improvisational techniques and principles in training teachers is quite established (e.g. Aadland et al., 2017).

A general review of the literature shows an increasing appreciation of how principles of and activities from improvisational theater can enhance learning experiences and skills development of students (e.g. Sawyer, 2011). The relevance of improvisational theater in education cannot be overstated. Students are now facing a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, where the organizational environment is shifting, complex and dynamic (e.g. Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). This calls for not only the development of knowledge on theories and concepts, but also an emphasis on a greater need to nurture the skills of adaptability, flexibility and resilience in students.

**Benefits of learning through improvisation**

So beyond promoting a flourishing classroom by adopting improv principles, mindset or activities in the classroom, what are the other tangible benefits of learning through improvisation?

*Learning through improvisation promotes deep learning*

The above section alludes to the positive educational benefits of using improv theater in education settings. When the educator engages in teaching as improvisation, it can promote
deep learning as students improvise by participating in the collaborative learning (e.g. Campbell, 2009).

According to Rhem (1995), the four criteria for deep learning are (1) motivational context, the intrinsic desire to know, make choices, and take ownership and responsibility for seeking a solution or making the right decision quickly; (2) learner activity, the experiential, inductive discovery in collaboration with other team members to synthesize, problem solve, or create knowledge; (3) interaction with others, with the spontaneity, intuition, quick thinking, brainstorming, trust-building, risk-taking, role-playing, and rapid decision making of improvisational dynamics; and (4) a well-structured knowledge base, where content is reshaped, synthesized, critiqued, and even created to demonstrate understanding and comprehension as well as analytical and evaluative skills. A review of a large body of research (e.g. Crossan et al., 2005) utilizing the improvisational lens or use of exercises, particularly in the organizational or business domain suggests that improvisation satisfies Rhem’s (1995) four criteria for deep learning. Thus, applied to the education setting, improvisation is likely to promote deep learning as well.

Learning through improvisation taps into Student’s multiple and emotional intelligence
Spreitzer et al. (2021) note that “a positive lens on learning highlights that individuals learn and develop in multiple domains” (p. 15). Extending this line of thought, this essay argues that learning through improvisation taps into students’ multiple and emotional intelligence.

According to Gardner (2000), students possess multiple types of intelligences such as musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic. Many have proposed that educators should adopt this “pluralistic view of the mind” and teach so that four to six of students’ intelligences are tapped instead of just one or two, probably every student could learn the material in most topics without struggling (e.g. Felder and Solomon, 2000).

Learning through improvisation can accomplish this goal. Improvisation requires active discovery, analysis, interpretation, problem-solving, memory, musical creation, physical activity, and the emotions of the self and others (Yamamoto, 2016). This covers multiple intelligences, rendering learning through improvisation a holistic and engaging experience for students.

Learning through improvisation promotes genuine dialogue
Learning through improvisation can also promote genuine dialogue in the classroom. Because the application improvisation in the classroom calls for both educator and students to view all in the classroom with mutual respect, working towards the goal of furthering understanding and knowledge, it can promote genuine dialogue (e.g. O’Neal and Hastings, 2019). In O’Neal and Hastings’ research, they found that the use of improvisation in classroom fostered vulnerability, and immediacy of presence. Vulnerability allowed students to open themselves up to new ways of thinking and perspectives. It also involved the awareness and acceptance of risks involved. Immediacy of presence meant that students were actively listening, suspending judgment and responding spontaneously. According to O’Neal and Hastings (2019), this is when true dialogue takes place.

Improvisation’s ability to promote generate dialogue is also inherently linked to the aspiration of positive education to promote genuine and open discourse amongst educators and students alike, where true collaboration and learning takes place.

Learning through improvisation requires and enhances positive psychological capital
Besides the above benefits, research has shown that improvisation in learning both requires and enhances positive psychological capital. According to Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) psychological capital encompasses capacities such as hope, optimism, efficacy and
resilience. Norris (2018) argues that the presence of psychological capital such as efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience increases the likelihood that students will engage in improvisational behavior and improvisational learning. Other research has shown that improvisation or participation in improv theater activities also enhances positive psychological capital. In particular, Harari (2015) demonstrated that participation in improv theater increased the mental resilience of undergraduate students. Similarly, Galvez and Crouch (2017) also found that having the improviser mindset can develop resilience. Thus, the link between improvisation and positive psychology is present, in that positive psychological capital is both a pre-condition and a consequence of improvisation.

Challenges in applying improvisational theater in management classroom
While there are multiple benefits of adopting improvisational theater principles, mindsets and even activities in classrooms, doing so comes with some challenges.

Suspending judgment can be difficult
The core principle of improvisational theater is “yes, and” and this involves suspending of judgment on what has been presented before. Suspending judgment does not mean that one has to accept or agree, but rather, it’s a brief moment where one appreciates the essence on what has been shared, before reacting with one’s own views and inclinations.

The “yes, and . . .” mindset and the ability to suspend judgment is useful and can reap much benefits for people who practice it; but it is inherently a difficult task. For instance, some educators or students may be naturally more critical, hold stronger opinions, or be less agreeable.

For educators who are teaching more quantitative or scientific subjects with clearer right or wrong answers, this may be hard to do, as their natural inclination is to note the wrongness or rightness of a student’s answer. When presented with a wrong answer, to practice suspending judgment, the educator should refrain from pointing out the answer is wrong right away, but find out more about where the student is coming from. By finding out more about the student’s perspective, the educator may be better able to “yes, and” and propel learning forward in the classroom. In fact, to practice suspending judgment, educators can practice “appreciative inquiry” method or “appreciative pedagogy” (e.g. Yballe and O’Connor) by questioning students further before responding with their own perspective or answer.

Suspending judgment may be difficult for students too, if they already come into class with strong assumptions, misconceptions, or opinions. When faced with views or perspectives drastically different from their own, some students may even feel “offended”. This may be particularly true or relevant when the course involves discussions around sensitive topics such as politics, race, or religion. Ironically, it is in this context where adopting the improv theater mindset is even more crucial and beneficial.

While this essay articulates the benefits of adopting the improvisational theater principles, mindsets, and activities, it is not blind to the inherent challenges behind adopting such a “yes and.” mindset, especially when sensitive topics in classroom discourse are involved.

Warming students up
In improvisational theater classes or performances, warm-ups are a key component to setting people up for the process of improvising and for a successful improvisational performance. Normally, the warm-ups would include energy warm-ups to warm up the body with movements; word association warm-ups to grease the wheels of creativity, and other games to get people to be in the present moment, and to be ready for improvisation.

However, classroom times are limited and with much prescribed content to cover, educators may not have enough time to truly warm-up students to adopting an
improvisational frame of mind. The classroom space may be limited as well, and may not afford the luxury of having educators and students move around to do an energy warm-up. However, this challenge can be overcome with short, but clever activities to get students into the mood for improvisation. Also, this challenge highlights the importance of having educators set the stage properly in the first class, or even before the first class of any course, to create a psychologically safe space for students to explore, learn and have fun. In the first class, it is important for the educator to introduce the improv philosophy and mindset and also model the tenets of improv. In terms of simple yet effective warm-ups at the start of every class, the educator can get students to build a story together. Each student has to take turns saying one word, with each word building on the one before. This simple activity hones active listening, collaboration skills, as students need to build on words that come before, and flexibility (letting go of one’s own story in one’s head).

**Looping back to learning objectives**
Ultimately, the job of educators is to cover the learning objectives of any course. The adoption of improvisational mindset, principle and activities have to serve the learning objectives of the course. Thus, it is up to the discretion of educators to decide how relevant the improv mindset is for their classroom.

The use of improvisational theater activities also needs to be done with discretion and skill. Improvisational theater activities can be a lot of fun and generate a lot of laughter. The challenge is that students forget or miss what learning they are supposed to glean out of the activity in relation to class concepts when the fun factor looms too large. Instructor need to bridge the gap between the improvisational theater activity and learning objectives in the set-up of the activity and the debrief.

**Conclusion**
The ultimate goal of positive approaches to education is arguably to achieve a classroom that is flourishing, where individuals and relationships thrive. The aspiration of this essay is to generate conversations and ultimately actions about the intersection of improvisational theater and positive education. Perhaps, in line with the “yes, and . . .” principle of improv, this essay could encourage educators to yes, and remain open-minded about the endless possibilities improv may bring, and collectively, create more flourishing classrooms.

**References**


Further reading


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