

**Capturing Confidence:
Engaging Improvisation Techniques to Teach Debate and Public Speaking Skills**

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Introduction

Public speaking remains one of the biggest fears in America, especially in college classrooms (Hunter et al., 2014). In many settings, college students and young adults lack the confidence to speak in front of their peers due to the negative association of the vulnerability needed to deliver a message (Bodie, 2010). Even still, effective oral communication remains one of the most important characteristics desired in the workforce (Crawford et al., 2011). Improvisational training has been known to help establish confidence and skill development in public speaking (Kristufek, 2008). In fact, improv theatre can be seen as a highly effective coping mechanism for boosting confidence and benefiting organizational and leadership situations where individuals must work together in a public speaking scenario, such as a small group discussion or debate (Hombach, 2018). College students who can challenge themselves to confidently deliver a message using improv techniques can acknowledge that public speaking might not be as hard as they think it might be (Hombach, 2018). For example, in improv theatre, there is likely no script, no exhaustive planning or research completed in advance, no predetermined staging or direction, and no pre-show strategy discussion for delivery. However, the result for most improvisational theatre actors is an innovative, organic, and often entertaining performance where the actors maintain a high level of confidence (Kristufek, 2008). As such, the purpose of this innovative teaching idea was to engage the agile and adaptive nature of improv to encourage confidence development and improve public speaking delivery.

How it Works

For this innovative teaching idea, we leveraged Hombach's (2018) conceptual model for improvisational theatre to teach small group discussion and debate skills in an effective leadership and oral communication course ($n = 144$) at New Mexico State University. Hombach (2018) outlined a three-prong approach for a successful improvisational theatre, including purpose, journey, and connectivity. As a result, we followed a similar approach to teach improvisational techniques. First, we introduced 10 foundational rules of improv, including concepts such as accepting the ideas of others, responding positively and quickly, keeping focus on the scene clear, etc. (Farlow, 2015), and then showed a few visual examples by Tina Fey (Hoang, 2015). Students discussed and captured ah-ha moments from the videos, and then separated into groups of four. Here, students drew a random topic from an idea pool generated for the small group discussion and debate later in the lesson. Topics ranged from serious to light-hearted sentiment. A few of the serious topics included banning human cloning, abolishing the death penalty, pending threats from global warming, and legalizing animal testing. A few of the more light-hearted topics included Taylor Swift vs. Selena Gomez, dogs are better than cats, Christmas decorations being hung before November 1, and why a hot dog is in fact a sandwich. Once each group drew their topic, we set a timer for two minutes and encouraged the group to build a story and act out scenes related to their topic using the rules of improv that they previously watched in the videos. All students were expected to speak and act out a connected scene until the timer stopped. Because we used this activity as an interest approach to a small

group discussion and debate unit, at the end of the activity, we reinforced the *purpose* of improv in carrying a message, the *journey* of confidence when acting out a scene, and the *connectedness* of adaptability and improv skills when building courage in public speaking.

Results to Date

Upon completing the activity, students agreed that leveraging improv skills when teaching adaptability in small group discussion or debate settings is helpful to building confidence. Some students mentioned that having permission to view public speaking exercises in a lighthearted and less-serious manner helped build confidence and a desire to speak in front of their peers. We anecdotally noted that students were willing to speak freely and more confidently in the small group discussion and debate that followed the interest approach. Students also engaged with their peers in the debate with definitive stances and tones, which was not observed as prominently in previous labs that engaged team dialog.

Incorporating this activity in a classroom setting can help instill confidence in public speaking through many avenues, specifically through the act of quick thinking and adaptability. Students can also see that in improv communication, there may not be a right or wrong answer, which enables free thinking and stress relief. The fun and relaxed environment connects and relates the students to public speaking and can show them that with time and practice, they can deliver a prepared speech with the same confidence. This activity helps students see public speaking through a fresh lens that opens new avenues for confidence to thrive.

Advice to Others

When teaching improv skills, it is helpful for students to engage their creativity and adaptability. When leveraging improv to establish confidence, we encourage instructors to communicate the expectation for agile conversations. Creating scenes within the classroom based on random scenarios can also set a foundation for improv skill development and enable the students to not feel vulnerable or judged by their peers. We also note that the practice topics do not need to be prescriptive or restricted. A key point of improv is to allow students to creatively—yet professionally—interpret scenes and act out random scenarios. Establishing a fun and welcome atmosphere is crucial to helping the activity work well. Improvisation also serves as a great collaboration tactic to implement in a classroom because of its ability to connect the students to each other and allow ideas to flow from their peers; therefore, we encourage instructors to identify ways to use improv scenarios in other team activities. Finally, we observed that students engaged with the light-hearted topics better than the serious topics. Therefore, if using this activity as an interest approach, we encourage saving the more difficult topics for a second trial to keep the energy high in the first attempt. If time allows, instructors can increase the time limit and add more rounds for practice.

Costs and Resources

Instructors will need access to the Internet and a projector to display and discuss the opening videos, and instructors should also prepare a list of random topics for students to draw. There are no other associated costs.

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