



Critical pedagogy in practice: Co-creating classroom community through improv comedy

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Abstract

Improv comedy is a vital tool in the communication classroom, as it embodies the principles of dialogic communication through an emphasis on a two-way model of message senders *and* receivers. By adapting traditional exercises to fit various class curricula, instructors must constantly renegotiate their role amidst ever-changing dynamics as they actively participate alongside students. This paper details the adaptation of a popular improv game, known as “Objection,” to demonstrate how improv can help establish a classroom community by developing empathy and encouraging students to connect, all while applying course concepts.

Overview

Critical pedagogy, as developed by Freire (1970), is the practice of inviting students to become motivated actors in their education and liberating themselves from traditional models of “banking style” education. These conventional modes of instruction place students as mere objects, rather than active subjects, to whom knowledge should be unequivocally bestowed or “deposited.” I argue that practicing improv in the classroom can liberate students from the banking style of education by inviting them to participate and apply course concepts in new and creative ways. Paolo Freire’s critical pedagogy has been adapted into various formats that provide specific actions to promote more active and participatory modes of learning, such as Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal revolutionized traditional theater performances by bringing audience members onto the stage to re-enact social conflict scenes with new solutions (Boal, 2000). But short of a community theater, professional

actors, and trained social change educators, what are other actionable ways through which we can sustain the ingenuity and authenticity of engaged learning philosophized by Freire? I argue that improvisational comedy techniques embody the principles of critical communication pedagogy and can successfully transform students from objects into subjects.

Both critical pedagogy and improv comedy value dialogic communication (the message receiver is as important as the message sender), local community (uplifting *all* voices in resistance to the dominant narrative), and liberation (freedom from external *and* internal oppression). Furthermore, improv performances commonly tout that no show is ever the same; similarly, no course, lecture, or classroom dynamic is ever the same. These conditions must be embraced in the educational context. Although a lesser-known art form rarely studied or used in academia, improv encourages instructors to invent new forms of gameplay with their students and focus on developing skills

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relevant to interpersonal communication, quick decision-making, and developing an authentic, autonomous voice to help prepare students for a wide range of mass communication professions.

I have used improv exercises in classes with undergraduates. However, professional improvisers are often contracted for corporate workshops, so these practices can be adapted for any level or course topic. I have also included improv exercises, both covertly (e.g., “we have a short activity today”) and overtly (inviting the owner of the local theater as a guest speaker), and both approaches are met with great enthusiasm by the students. Although there may be slight apprehension at first, I find that with clarity in instruction and a positive classroom environment, students walk away feeling energized and more invested in the course material, and have even incorporated improv performances into their final projects.

While there are various techniques and exercises that adapt easily to the classroom, the most clear example that I have used in a variety of contexts is a courtroom-style debate known as “Objection.” A Google search will reveal many versions of this game; however, the following description is informed by my years of training at an improv facility in Miami, Florida, and adapted from my own experience teaching undergraduate Communication courses at the University of Miami and a community college in St. Louis, Missouri. The purpose of this exercise is for students to explore the fundamentals involved in creating and interrogating an original argument, as well as to understand an argument from an opposing point of view. The instructor acts as the “judge,” the classroom acts as the “jury,” and four student volunteers form two teams of “attorneys.”

The instructor introduces the game and asks for four student volunteers to join them at the front of the classroom. When the students arrive at the front, they should be split into teams of two, standing on either side of the instructor, all facing the classroom. The instructor then prompts the class to suggest an issue that will be debated as “two sides of the same coin.” At improv shows, this usually takes the form of “red vs. blue,” “cats vs. dogs,” or, often, a fun reference to the pop culture tipping point of the day. However, in the communication classroom, I have used this exercise to have students debate such topics as “regulation vs. censorship,” “qualitative vs. quantitative research,” and “TikTok vs. Instagram,” among others. It is important to note that the instructor must

lead the entire exercise punctually, tactfully, and most notably, with a fun attitude – they should not allow space for political or personal attacks to infiltrate the arguments. While I have never personally observed this, a reader must understand my caution in providing these relatively limited instructions for a slapdash debate to be conducted in classrooms that focus on the contemporary and often controversial effects of media and society.

With this in mind, as the jury provides suggestions, the instructor should be patient and encourage multiple responses from the class. Once a topic has been chosen, one “side” should be assigned as Team A and the other side as Team B. The instructor will then inform the audience that each side will deliver an opening argument in favor of or against the issue, followed by a cross-examination, and conclude with a closing argument – all of which should be timed (60 seconds works well, but it should be consistent). At this point, the instructor should truly “become” the judge – use phrases and mannerisms akin to courtroom dramas (i.e., “people of the jury” and “order!”). The judge then invites the first player from Team A to deliver their argument. It does not matter which player goes first; encourage the students to use their non-verbal communication skills to decide quickly among themselves. After the argument concludes, lead the class in a round of applause and a quick comment or quip to positively reinforce the student’s performance, as well as to solidify the argument in everyone’s minds. Repeat for Team B. After this concludes, inform the class that Team A will now “cross-examine” Team B, that is, to question and/or cast doubt on their argument. Team B has the opportunity to respond, but both components of the cross-examination should be brief and used to playfully heighten the stakes of the debate. Again, it does not matter which teammate chooses to cross-examine or respond; let the students decide. Repeat for Team B. After the cross-examinations, invite the Team A student who did not deliver the opening argument to deliver the closing argument. Repeat for Team B. After the concluding arguments, lead the class in another round of applause before asking the jury to “deliberate.” Depending on the size of the class and timing, this can be done with applause or through written ballots. A table summarizing the game’s order is provided below (Figure 1).

There are a multitude of free internet resources that describe and demonstrate improv games, and this supply becomes infinite when used at an instructor’s

Figure 1. Suggested order for “Objection.”

Introduction	Judge/Host/Instructor takes a Jury/Audience/Class suggestion.	
Opening arguments	Team A	Team B
Cross-examinations	Team A → Team B	Team B → Team A
Closing arguments	Team A	Team B
Deliberation	Judge/host/instructor takes a vote from jury/audience/class.	

creative discretion.

For example, I have conducted a larger version of Objection with the entire class, which includes more “sides” and allows teams time to research and prepare their arguments using their laptops. Other improv games that I have successfully used in the classroom include free word associations and press conference role-plays.

More importantly, this toolkit can give you the confidence and creativity to invent new games using course material and improv principles. For example, in a public speaking class, I printed the textbook definitions of various speech types (briefings, reports, awards, tributes, etc.) and asked students to act them out while their classmates had to guess the appropriate speech type. Also in this class, I asked students to write down an interpersonal conflict from their own lives, place them in a hat, then act out in pairs a particular conflict management style (avoiding, accommodating, etc.) inspired by the anonymous conflict drawn from the hat. This activity also required students to guess the appropriate conflict management style. No matter the game, these activities require not only improvisation from the students, but also from the instructor.

Improv philosophies emphasize empathy, community, two-way communication and can be utilized to invite students to become active participants in their education. Instructors must be confident, creative, and nimble to think of fun, participatory ways to deliver a lecture. It is essential to note that neither critical pedagogy nor improvisational theater can be learned from a manual; they emerge from genuine connection and innovation within a community. I offer this description of the exercise not only as a tool for others to implement in their classrooms, but also as inspiration to look beyond the walls of the Ivory tower for creative pedagogical approaches. Utilizing improvisational comedy in the classroom acts as a reminder (and if necessary, *permission*) to instructors that we, too, can have fun.

References

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