

## IMPROVING THE CASE DISCUSSION WITH AN IMPROV MINDSET

Andy Aylesworth, McCallum Graduate School of Business, Bentley College,  
175 Forest St., Waltham, MA 02452; (781) 891-3149

### ABSTRACT

Business practitioners and scholars have increasingly recognized the value of improvisation in the business world. Organizational improvisation, has been studied in the context of, for example, new product development (Moorman and Miner 1998), organizational learning (Miner et al 2001), organizational design and analysis (Weick 1998), and organizational restructuring (Ciborra 1996). To better understand and explain the phenomenon of organizational improvisation, scholars have turned to improvisational arts, specifically theater and jazz, where improvisation is the norm, rather than the exception (Cunha et al 1999). For example, improvisational theater has been invoked to better understand business innovation (Crossan 1997), management (e.g., Koppett 2002), collaborative technology (McKnight and Bontis 2002), and team performance (Vera and Crossan 2005). Given the scholarly attention that has been devoted to using improvisational metaphors and techniques to better understand business, it is somewhat surprising that with a few exceptions (e.g., Gibb 2004), there is scant literature about how these techniques can be applied to improve business pedagogy. This paper describes how establishing an improvisational "mindset" in the classroom can improve discussions surrounding a case.

According to *Truth in Comedy*, "We all go through life everyday without a script, responding to our environment, making it up as we go along." (Halpern, Close, and Johnson 1994, p. 14). Indeed, all conversation is basically improvised (Sawyer 2000), and a case discussion is essentially an extended conversation. While much improvisation is extemporaneous, this is not to say that improvisers do not prepare and rehearse. On the contrary, successful improvisation relies on several guidelines that must be extensively practiced for the improvisers to be successful. Successful improv also requires players to listen intently to each other, to be "in the moment," in order to be successful.

The paper first briefly summarizes the case method and some of the challenges associated with utilizing it. It then describes several guidelines that can lead to an "improv mindset," defined as a predisposition to collaborate rather than compete, and support your

fellow players' actions and ideas in order to see where they lead.

The cornerstone of improv theater is the concept of "yes, and" (e.g., Crossan 1998). This concept means that players must accept what other players say, then build upon it. Correctly utilizing this relatively simple concept leads individual improvisers to a sense of confidence in their abilities. The concept of "accept and build" is easy to explain and easy for students to understand. Other improv guidelines that may be beneficial to discussions include DORQ (Deny, Order, Repeat and Question), Driving in the Rearview Mirror, Build a Brick, not a Cathedral, Take Care of Yourself, and "Mistakes" are Good Offers in Disguise.

While it is doubtful that a business class could ever be mistaken for an improv troupe, an instructor can begin to instill the improv mindset by explaining some of the improv guidelines discussed in this paper and by reinforcing their use. If students accept and build upon each others' responses, and if they have confidence in their actions and that their actions will be supported by the rest of the group, they are more likely to take risks by participating and offering novel ways of viewing a problem.

In all, an improv mindset can lead to "high trust; spontaneity and creativity; collaboration; listening and awareness; communication; and effective interaction." (Gibb 2004, p. 743), all traits that are valuable in a case discussion. Comedienne Gilda Radner said: "Some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity...." This describes improv, and case discussions, quite well.

The author is grateful to improv performers Elyse Becker, Steve Kleinedler, Sharon Leckie, Will Luera, David Marino, Matt Mosher and Erik Volkert; and case teachers Susan Fournier, Joby John and Andrew Zacharakis. Each contributed insights that greatly enhanced this paper.

**References Available on Request**