

# Improv Comedy and Modern Marketing Education: Exploring Consequences for Divergent Thinking, Self-Efficacy, and Collaboration

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## Abstract

In an era of constant connectedness—from Twitter tweets to the 24-hour news cycle—the need for marketers to be nimble and responsive to the needs of consumers and ever-evolving markets is greater than ever before. Indeed, being able to be “in the moment” and to react instantaneously demands a different kind of training and education than the slower paced, carefully constructed, and casually timed marketing campaigns of yesterday. Improvisational comedy and its tenets—agreement (“Yes, and . . .”); be you (and know that you are enough); make bold, unexpected choices—require a comparable, in-the-moment mind-set that encourages group collaboration, positive self-efficacy, and the ability to generate creative ideas without hesitation. Two studies show that improvisational training has positive consequences for group collaboration, self-efficacy, and divergent thinking, skills essential for modern marketing roles. First, an exploratory study of the general population reveals preliminary links between improvisation familiarity and the aforementioned marketing skills, as well as between a brief improv manipulation and divergent thinking. Second, a follow-up study using actual students in a 10-week improvisation course confirms causal relationships between long-term improv training and group collaboration, self-efficacy, and divergent thinking. Effect sizes are large and endure even 4 months following the improv training.

## Keywords

improvisation, divergent thinking, self-efficacy, collaboration, education

Power out? No problem. You can still dunk in the dark.

—Oreo Cookie @Oreo Tweet, February 3, 2013

During the third quarter of Super Bowl XLVII, an unexpected power outage hit the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans, and for more than half an hour 100 million viewers waited anxiously for the football game to resume. Within minutes of the power going out, the Twitter account for Oreo—the famous sandwich cookie—tweeted the image of a cookie shrouded in darkness with the copy: “You can still dunk in the dark.” The tweet read, “Power out? No problem.” a reference to the situation still unfolding at the Superdome (Oreo, 2013). Almost immediately, the tweet began receiving attention, obtaining 16,000 retweets, 7,000 likes, and 1,100 comments including one that read, “@Oreo You win the Internet” (Modell, 2013).

In what is, perhaps, one of the clearest examples of the increasingly immediate demands being placed on marketers, the Oreo tweet symbolizes both the opportunities and the challenges that arise when companies and customers are constantly connected. Indeed, the ability to “think on one’s feet,” as well as to have the infrastructure and work group support

to execute an idea quickly, are all essential if a marketer hopes to take advantage of a timely opportunity before it slips away. In the case of Oreo, this sort of nimbleness was actually the work of a team of people who, a full year prior to the tweet, decided their new digital strategy going forward would involve a “daily twist”—capturing the sentiment of Oreo’s consumers each day and responding to that sentiment with a relevant post (Kaplan, 2013). The result? When the power went out in New Orleans, the Oreo team was ready and, just a quick tweet later, Oreo received more attention and engagement than some of brands that paid roughly \$4 million for a traditional television spot.

When it comes to preparing current marketing students for the kind of immediacy required in modern marketing careers, particularly in the domains of digital and social media, traditional marketing curriculum falls short (Schlee & Harich, 2014). While marketing research and, more recently,

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data analytics teach students to make *informed* decisions, there is a dearth of exercises designed to teach students how to make quick decisions, how to think creatively in the moment, and how to embrace a collaborative mind-set that might allow them to connect with colleagues and customers to execute creative ideas more quickly.

The need for divergent thinking, collaborative skills, and self-efficacy is also apparent in a domain beyond marketing: improvisational comedy. By definition, improvisation is not preplanned but, instead, is inspired in the moment based on a one-word suggestion from the audience, a current event, or even the general sentiment of a crowd at the time. Seasoned improvisers are able to work together and create content on the spot, gauging the temperature of the room and adjusting the content according to the real-time feedback from the audience, much like how marketers adjust campaign components over the course of a marketing campaign's run. Given the parallels between improvisational comedy and marketing, might it be possible for the tenets and skills taught within improvisational comedy to be taught and applied within marketing education?

The purpose of the current work is to explore the idea that the fundamental tenets of improvisational comedy—agreement (“Yes, and . . .”); be you (and know that you are enough); make bold, unexpected choices—are relevant to the skills necessary for marketers in an increasing digital and social media world and, even more important, that these skills are able to be *taught*. Specifically, two studies—an exploratory study of the general population and an experimental study of undergraduate students—provide support for the idea that improvisational comedy has positive consequences for divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration. Interestingly, while positive outcomes emerge for people in the general population with some knowledge of improv or who receive a brief improv manipulation, the beneficial effects of improv training become more readily apparent and stronger for students who have completed a 10-week improv course (but not for students enrolled in a different course over the same 10-week period). These results provide empirical evidence that training in improvisational comedy and its tenets can produce beneficial outcomes for skills critical to success in modern marketing roles—divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration.

## Theoretical Background

Recent reflection on what it takes to produce a “work-ready” marketing graduate, along with updating marketing curriculum for an increasingly “digital-first” world, revealed some interesting insights about preparing marketing students for the modern job market (Greenacre, Freeman, Jaskari, & Cadwallader, 2017). Some of the most important attributes proposed included multidisciplinary approaches to enhance creative thinking, communication, and collaborative skills

(Rohm, Stefl, & Saint Clair, 2018), as well as more personal traits like self-motivation, being proactive, and the drive to achieve (McArthur, Kubacki, Pang, & Alcaraz, 2017). With these desired characteristics of a modern “work-ready” marketing graduate in mind, what follows is a review of research relevant to exploring the relationship between improvisation and the skills required for success in the modern marketing landscape.

## The Shifting Demands of Marketing Education and Modern Marketing Careers

The need to be nimble—to think creatively and quickly—in modern marketing careers is similar in many ways to the changing demands of the modern university classroom in which engagement and experiential learning are increasingly preferred to one-way, “talking head” lectures. Within marketing education, specifically, the discussion of this shift from a “teacher-centered, product-based” paradigm to one that is “student-focused and process-oriented” is not new, even if adoption of this approach is not yet universal (Minzberg, 1976). This demand for a more engaging, experiential approach has its roots in the changing demographics of university students. Consider, for example, how proponents of live cases in marketing classrooms supported their cause by citing how modern university students, having grown up in an era of television, both lacked the attention span and possessed a greater need for stimulation than their predecessors, the kind of stimulation traditional classroom lectures simply do not provide (Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001). That work, published almost 20 years ago, was an era before laptops, tablets, and touchscreen phones became increasingly prevalent—consumer trends that have almost certainly decreased individuals’ attention spans and further heightened their need for immediate stimulation. Case in point, consider the oft-cited Microsoft Corporation study that infamously claimed the human attention span had decreased in the 15-year time period from 2000 to 2015 to lower than that of a goldfish (8.25 seconds for humans vs. 9 seconds for a goldfish) due largely in part to the prevalence of technological devices (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2018). Although more anecdotal than scientific, the informal Microsoft study highlights the challenge of educating minds in modern classrooms: competing for attention with multiple devices that are constantly connected to an ever-changing world.

From the classroom to the conference room, this trend of greater connectedness, greater stimulation, and divided attention persists. Indeed, research suggests that this greater connectedness has continued to facilitate a shift from product-centered marketing to consumer-centered marketing, like “consumer co-creation” (Pahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and “participatory marketing” (Wood, Lindsay, Gluth, Corso, & Bilsborow, 2017). Relying on the notion of the “networked information society,” Wood et al. (2017) address

the modern expectations involved with co-creation and consumer engagement given the prevalence of Web 2.0 technologies, social networks, and other interactive media. Specifically, consumers exhibit a greater “ability to ‘multi-task,’ a desire for immediacy, a preference for multi-modal learning, and a need to be socially connected . . . responding best to experiential activities and ‘things that matter’” (Wood et al., 2017, p. 13). This sort of immediacy and heightened engagement, the researchers contend, calls for a greater need of creativity and creative problem solving, as well as an ability to produce ideas relevant to the moment instantaneously. Thinking back to Oreo’s Super Bowl tweet, creating and executing the clever post so quickly relied on creativity, collaboration, and the boldness or audacity to follow through without careful thought, planning, or deliberation and the belief it could be done.

Prior research has linked the integration of creativity and creative problem solving to marketing outcomes (Titus, 2000), but just as the demands placed on modern marketing roles have changed, so, too, have expectations about what skills are needed. Although several tenets of creativity remain necessary—flexibility of ideas, generating a large number of ideas, random associations—some additional skills have been integrated more recently that reflect increasing immediacy: intuition, risk taking, removing inhibitions, and increasing self-efficacy (Wood et al., 2017). Thus, the integration of activities, particularly engaging and experiential activities, that facilitate generating a greater number of creative ideas quickly, decrease inhibition and increase self-efficacy, and foster group/collaborative work would likely better prepare current marketing students for the demands awaiting them in the new professional marketing landscape.

### *Improvisational Comedy and the “Rules of Improvisation”*

Improvisational comedy traces its origins to mid-20th century Chicago when Viola Spolin, a theatre academic and acting coach, developed short games for actors to help them tap into the current moment and to master the use of their intuition. The games, inspired by work Spolin had done with social worker Neva Boyd to help young immigrant children foster community and collaboration in spite of various cultural and language barriers, formed the basis of what would become known as “short-form improv.” It was Paul Sills, Spolin’s son, and some friends at the University of Chicago who transformed the games from acting and social facilitation exercises to entertainment, eventually culminating in the creation of *The Second City* in 1959. In the early years, improv as a nascent art form was unstructured, with little understanding about why some scenes worked and why others did not. Finally, in 1957, an attempt was made to develop the rules or tenets of improvisation, which were originally

known as the Westminster Place Kitchen Rules (Wasson, 2017, p. 51):

1. Don’t deny.
2. Whenever possible, make a strong choice.
3. You are you.

The first rule would eventually come to be known as the “Yes, and . . .” rule or “agreement” in which improvisers are taught to agree with whatever ideas their scene partners offer to them and then to contribute and add onto those ideas. For example, if a scene begins with an actor saying, “Ugh, it is raining cats and dogs today!” then an appropriate “Yes, and . . .” reply could be, “Yes, and I forgot my umbrella at home!” The idea is that by agreeing and offering more to the scene, the scene will propel itself forward and take the performers along for the ride. The responsibility of the improv actor, then, is to participate in this collaborative process, “Yes, and-ing,” the ideas presented by fellow scene partners and contributing his or her own ideas on top of what is being offered for others to build on.

The second rule, “Whenever possible, make a strong choice,” speaks to the creativity, divergent thinking, and risk-taking inherent in improvisational comedy. Many improvisational sets begin with the solicitation of a “suggestion” from the audience, which is simply an idea that can inspire the upcoming scene. If an audience member suggests, “Sugar,” an actor can begin the scene with a literal portrayal of sugar, opening the scene within a bakery and explicitly discussing sugar as an ingredient. More creative takes on the same suggestion might involve a scene in the American South where the word “sugar” is used as a term of endearment or a skiing scene set in Aspen where a first-time skier, trying to fit in, mistakenly refers to snow as “powdered sugar” instead of simply “powder.” This deviation from, or bold twist on, what is expected is often at the center of comedy (Vorhaus, 1994) and is what many improvisers take delight in doing during performances. In order to get to these opportunities, trained improv actors immediately have to generate a list of as many interpretations and variations of the proposed suggestion as possible in just seconds before the scene begins, ultimately selecting one to pursue. Even if that bold choice does not elicit the expected response from the audience, improvisers commit to their choice and recognize there is joy in “failing spectacularly,” as this is often just as funny to audiences. The key to making a clever choice is generating many ideas in the first place.

The third rule, “You are you,” encourages the improviser to realize the he or she is funny enough simply being themselves, as comedy often requires simply putting a magnifying glass on what is already true. Beginning improvisers sometimes go to great lengths to pretend to be something they are not, but some of the best improvisational work is grounded in real, everyday situations. A classic scene from

The Second City archives consists of Tina Fey and Rachel Dratch playing a mother and daughter looking for a dress for a school dance, both speaking in East Coast accents comparable to those they grew up within Philadelphia and Boston, respectively. Young improv actors are taught to shed any inhibitions and to just feel comfortable being themselves onstage. Characters can add comedic elements, but boldly being oneself is funny enough. Stated differently: when it comes to improvisation, you are you, and you are enough. Committing to one's choices and believing that everything will work out is critical. Just as optimism has a positive effect on creativity in the design-thinking literature, so, too, might it be possible for self-efficacy and divergent thinking to be enhanced via improvisation with the potential for further positive downstream consequences (Liedtka, 2014).

Although several variations of improvisation's rules/tenets exist, these three original rules form the basis of any improvisational training, whether at The Second City or iO (formerly known as ImprovOlympic) in Chicago, Upright Citizens Brigade in New York, or The Groundlings in Los Angeles. Collaborating with one's scene partners, generating many ideas quickly, and believing that you are more than capable of succeeding on stage no matter what surprises may come are the very foundation of successful improvisational comedy.

### *Linking Improvisation With Business Outcomes: Modern Marketing Education*

Seeing the overlap between the skills of improvisation and those required in modern boardrooms and companies—teamwork, group collaboration, brainstorming skills, divergent-thinking ability, self-motivation, presentation skills—several of the most famous improv institutions have designated consulting divisions within their organization, like The Second City's *Second City Works* group. Companies around the world hire improv-trained consultants to lead improv activities with employees with the belief that engaging in the exercises will foster more creative thinking, more collaboration, greater employee confidence, and other benefits. Although these trainings have increased in popularity over time, very little empirical evidence exists demonstrating the effectiveness of such training.

The academic literature regarding the consequences of improvisation is relatively scarce. While some literature exists on the cognitive processes underlying improvisation in other domains, such as music (Lewis & Lovatt, 2013) and dance (Sowden, Clements, Redlich, & Lewis, 2015), very little research exists on the practical outcomes of improvisational comedy training and even less research exists on the mechanisms underlying these practical outcomes (Pressing, 1984). Still some research has explored the consequences of improvisational training or experience in business contexts—negotiations (Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005), management and organizations

(Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005), and sales (Rocco & Whalen, 2014).

Most of the work linking improvisation to business tends to be qualitative and speculative in illuminating the parallels between the art form and related constructs in the business domain. For example, in the work on negotiation (Balachandra et al., 2005), the authors discuss how thinking in-the-moment and the ability to adapt are valuable characteristics in both improv and negotiation contexts, but that other skills—like personal charisma—could help in one context (i.e., improv) and hurt in another (i.e., negotiations and perceived trustworthiness). However likely, the negotiation research presents no empirical data on these proposed relationships.

Prior research exploring the role of improvisation in the context of organizational behavior and management initially sought to link theatrical improvisation to areas and concepts relevant to management: interpreting the environment, cultivating leadership, developing individual skills, fostering teamwork, and assessing organizational culture (Crossan, 1998). This research, qualitative by design, introduced improvisational theory into the management literature. Subsequent research investigating the effect of improvisational techniques on innovation within organizations was among the very first to capture empirical data on improvisation's effectiveness in a business context (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Although the authors found only an ambiguous relationship between improv training and innovation, that relationship was moderated by other organizational factors (e.g., experimental culture and teamwork skills) further hinting at improvisation's role within an organizational context. While any direct benefit of improvisation alone remained unclear, this work represented an important first step with respect to measuring the influence of improvisation on business-related outcomes.

A related stream of research in the management literature, the work on agility, focuses primarily on employee responses to experiences of change. In the work on learning agility, for example, dimensions of agility included people agility, results agility, mental agility, and change agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Interestingly, these dimensions map nicely onto the aforementioned improv tenets: people agility (collaboration), results and change agility (self-efficacy), and mental agility (divergent thinking). However, an important conceptual distinction exists between improvisation and agility such that the former is more a means to an end, while the latter is an end state or outcome. Stated differently, one might expect that improvisational training could increase employee agility within organizational contexts. Indeed, as models of agility continue to be refined within the management and industrial organizational psychology literature (DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012), more links are likely to emerge between improvisational training and employee agility, further underscoring the potential practical impact of the current work.

Beyond agility, improvisation is a term that can be linked to concepts like spontaneity, innovation, and inventiveness. However, an important distinction should be made between the generic term “improvisation,” and the half-century-old artform of comedic improvisation that is the focus of the current article. This improvisation consists of established rules and exercises shared and taught by improv institutions around the world, which is remarkably different from the way one thinks about more descriptive concepts like innovativeness and spontaneity that lack comparable rules, training, and artistic origins. In addition, like the agility example above, the distinction between an end and a means to an end is worth considering, as well, as improvisational training has the potential to enhance spontaneity, innovation, inventiveness, and other outcomes, whereas the reverse may not be true: teaching someone how to be innovative may not yield success in comedic improvisation just as someone could be creative, in general, but not necessarily good at improvisation. Even brainstorming has its own set of rules and best practices that are different from those of improvisation. While these concepts certainly share some similarities, such as generating ideas quickly, it is worth exploring the unique effects that improv and improvisational training may have on important marketing outcomes (e.g., divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration), which is the goal of the current article.

Within marketing, specifically, the idea that improvisational comedy can have beneficial effects for marketers has roots in a foundational paper that proposed a link between an “improv mind-set” and the case study method often used in business classrooms (Aylesworth, 2008). In this work, the author proposed links between several tenets of improvisational theatre—“Yes, and . . .,” “Deny, Order, Repeat, and Question (DORQ),” and Driving in the Rearview Mirror to name a few—to the skills helpful for successful case study performance: creativity, collaboration, listening, and awareness. On introducing the tenets of improvisation through a handout, in-class examples, and an improvisational warm-up, the author integrated the improvisational elements within the context of a case study discussion. Although the author states that his review of this approach was anecdotal and descriptive, it is worth noting that students did see a connection between their improv activities and the case discussion process and that most seemed to enjoy the experience.

Although the case study paper lacked empirical data to support the proposed effectiveness of an “improv mind-set,” recent research in an applied marketing context explored the relationship between the “Yes, and . . .” mind-set of improvisation and measurable outcomes for both sales effectiveness and course evaluations (Rocco & Whalen, 2014). In a course in which students engage in a 4-week sales project that involves selling tickets for professional sports teams who partner with the class, some students received a classroom lecture, demonstration, and role-playing exercise to

learn the “Yes, and . . .” rule of improv comedy. As predicted, the authors found that students who received some training on the rule of “Yes, and . . .” achieved higher average ticket sales (30.1 tickets sold per student) compared with a group of sales students who received no such training (21.1 tickets sold per student). Furthermore, when given a general student satisfaction survey in class, the “Yes, and . . .” students gave the course a higher rating (4.8/5.0) than the sales students who did not receive the training (4.5/5.0). The results would suggest that not only did the “Yes, and . . .” activity improve sales performance but the training also led the students to appreciate their classroom experience even more. This positive classroom experience echoes prior work in which students value creative education and experiential activities in the classroom (McCorkle, Payan, Reardon, & Kling, 2007).

Together, the Aylesworth (2008) and Rocco and Whalen (2014) projects provide a strong foundation for the current project. Indeed, whether the use of an “improv mind-set” for case studies or the effectiveness of a “Yes, and . . .” training for improving ticket sales, it would seem that there is something remarkable about improvisational comedy, its tenets, and the opportunity for them to enhance important classroom and marketplace outcomes. Additionally, the positive feedback from students in both projects, from the qualitative feedback in the Aylesworth’s (2008) example and the higher quantitative course evaluation in the Rocco and Whalen’s (2014) project, underscores the aforementioned evidence suggesting that modern students prefer more experiential, engaging exercises that capture their attention and satisfy their need for stimulation but that do so in a way that simultaneously teaches them skills relevant to their chosen major and career. Together, these findings illustrate the critical importance of exploring improvisation and its role in marketing practice *and* marketing education. This article strives to do just that.

Specifically, to build on this prior work, the purpose of the current article is to investigate possible intermediate effects underlying the qualitative findings of the Aylesworth (2008) article and the practical outcomes (e.g., improved sales) of the Rocco and Whalen (2014) article. Both of these prior projects consider the possibility that improvisational training can enhance traits and qualities important for modern marketing students and practitioners—enhanced creativity, “thinking better on one’s feet,” team/group collaboration, greater confidence/self-efficacy—some of the same skills mentioned by the “work-ready” marketing student and “digital-first” research. However, these outcomes are neither explored directly nor measured explicitly. Thus, one contribution of the current article is to provide empirical evidence of the potential relationship between improvisation and these more immediate outcomes—divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and collaboration—which, in turn, may be likely to influence downstream outcomes like ticket sales, case performance,

and class satisfaction shown in the prior research. In doing so, this article explores the potential ways in which improv elicits positive business outcomes so that improv as a tool for education and business performance can be better understood going forward.

A secondary goal of the current project is to explore the effectiveness between a short-term improv manipulation and a comparable, longer improv training on the dependent variables of interest. In the prior work considering improv training and its influence in marketing education contexts, whether linking an “improv mind-set” with in-class group performance on case studies (Aylesworth, 2008) or improved course evaluations and increased ticket sales following a brief “Yes, and . . .” training (Rocco & Whalen, 2014), the exposure to improvisation and its tenets was relatively minimal yet still elicited favorable outcomes. While it may be true that a short, abbreviated training can produce positive outcomes, it might also be true that a longer, more extensive training could bolster those outcomes and potentially have long-lasting consequences. Such a finding would strengthen the argument that training in improvisational comedy and its tenets would nicely complement a traditional business school education and that such training would have lasting, positive effects in the modern marketplace.

## Overview of the Present Research

The goal of the present research is to explore the relationship between improvisational comedy and its effects on divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration, all skills essential for “work-ready” marketers working in roles that demand quick thinking and greater immediacy, such as positions in digital and social media marketing (Greenacre et al., 2017; Rohm et al., 2018). Drawing on the foundational work linking improvisational comedy to marketing (Aylesworth, 2008; Rocco and Whalen, 2014), the current work hypothesizes the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** A positive relationship exists between improvisational comedy education and divergent-thinking ability.

**Hypothesis 2:** A positive relationship exists between improvisational comedy education and one’s perceived self-efficacy on a marketing-related task.

**Hypothesis 3:** A positive relationship exists between improvisational comedy education and one’s perceptions about group collaboration.

These three hypotheses derive from the qualitative work of Aylesworth (2008) and the proposed, but not tested, processes underlying the sales and course evaluation findings of Rocco and Whalen (2014). Demonstrating a link between improvisation education and positive outcomes for divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration would support the

proposed ideas from these previous projects while also opening up more avenues for potential research linking these constructs to practical marketing consequences—for example, knowing that training students in improvisational comedy enhances group collaboration could inspire future studies in which improv education may improve business outcomes known to rely on group collaboration and cohesion, like brainstorming or new product launches.

It is worth noting that the three original Westminster Place Kitchen Rules, as originally written and intended, map onto these three marketing-related outcome variables quite well. The first rule—don’t deny—represents the group collaborative spirit of agreement and “Yes, and . . .”—taking what your scene partners offer and adding more to their gift, with the “gift” referring to the statement, gesture, emotional reaction, or behavior your scene partner has just contributed to the scene. This contribution is referred to as a “gift” to remind improvisers that improvisation is a team effort in which any contribution from one player is intended to inspire others to build on that contribution, and so on, as a scene unfolds in a positive, constructive manner. The second rule—whenever possible, make a strong choice—encourages quick-thinking skills and the ability to generate multiple ideas from a single audience suggestion before ultimately selecting one bold idea from the many ideas generated to pursue (divergent thinking). Finally, the third rule—you are you—reminds improvisers that they, alone, are enough, that real life is funny, and that they simply need to believe they can succeed in the absence of script, story, or direction to increase the likelihood of actual success on stage—a testament to one’s self-efficacy (see Table 1).

Furthermore, if it is true that familiarity with improv leads to beneficial marketing outcomes, then a second goal of the current work is to explore whether a short-term improv manipulation is as effective as a comparable, long-term improv training. Specifically, by first conducting an exploratory study with a sample of the general population, the current project can discover whether general knowledge of improvisational comedy and a short improv manipulation have an effect on the key dependent variables of interest outlined above. This, unto itself, is interesting, but even more critical to pedagogy and curriculum design is whether a more detailed, extensive training in improvisational comedy bolsters results, producing even stronger effects that endure over time. If so, then the current article would make a strong case for including improvisational training as an important part of modern business curricula over and above a short-term or in-class activity, which, while perhaps still beneficial, may be limited in its effectiveness.

Two studies—an exploratory study of the general population and an experimental study of undergraduate students—follow, both exploring the relationship between improvisational comedy and three dependent variables of interest: divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and collaboration.

**Table 1.** Understanding the Relationship Between Improv Rules and Marketing Skills.

Marketing skill	Improv rule	Explanation	Improv activities
Collaboration	“Yes, and . . .”/agreement	Accept the reality your scene partners are creating, the gifts they are giving you, and then add onto that reality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Yes, and . . .” Scenes</li> <li>• Freeze Tag/Scene Tag</li> <li>• Acting Is Reacting</li> <li>• One-Word Alien</li> <li>• Slides</li> </ul>
Divergent thinking	Make a strong choice. The less obvious, the better.	Think broadly, and don’t be afraid to take risks. Come up with more ideas than you need, and make an unexpected choice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ba Dum, Ba Dum</li> <li>• Take It Back</li> <li>• Song Circle</li> </ul>
Self-efficacy	You are you, and you are enough.	Trust that you have what it takes. Make bold choices, and trust everything will be fine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objection!</li> <li>• Conducted Story</li> <li>• ABC/1-3-7</li> </ul>

### Experiment 1: Exploratory Study of Improv’s Positive Effects (General Population)

Experiment 1 is an exploratory study that tests both (a) whether familiarity with improvisation, in general, and (b) a quick improv training manipulation relate to or influence the dependent variables of interest: divergent thinking, self-efficacy on a creative marketing task, and ease of group collaboration. This initial study serves as a litmus test that, if links are apparent, encourages a more in-depth study of improv and its relationship to these variables. In addition, by conducting this exploratory study consisting of only measured familiarity with improvisation followed by a very short improv training manipulation with the general population, the results of the study permit comparison with a more involved, stronger manipulation with a student sample. Observing any relationship, correlational or otherwise, between the general population’s familiarity with improv and the dependent variables of interest would be noteworthy, while any causal effect of the short “Yes, and . . .” manipulation would give even further credence to the idea that improv and its tenets can be taught and can produce positive changes. Thus, the purpose of this initial exploratory study is to test for those relationships in anticipation for a more extensive follow-up study.

#### Participants and Procedure

A total of 260 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38.48$ ,  $SD = 11.21$ ; 52% female) recruited from Amazon MTurk agreed to participate in an experiment they were told was a survey exploring idea generation and personality, a cover story designed to disguise the true purpose of the experiment. On beginning the survey, participants completed a series of familiarity ratings in which they were asked to indicate their familiarity with a variety of subjects and the details of those subjects (5-point scale: 1 = *extremely unfamiliar*, 5 = *extremely familiar*). Categories included sports, dogs, improvisational comedy,

painting, film, architecture, furniture design, cooking, world history, and poetry, randomly presented. This served as the measure of improv familiarity, while the additional categories disguised the true purpose of the study.

On indicating their familiarity with each of the categories, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the experimental, “Yes, and . . .” condition or the control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were told that one of the most important skills in modern time was the ability to agree with others and to contribute something of substance. These participants were presented with 10 prompts (e.g., “The sun is shining so bright . . .”) and instructed to continue where the prompt left off with a statement that began with, “Yes, and . . .” Thus, one such example from this group included, “The sun is shining so bright . . . yes, and I forgot my sunglasses!” In the control condition, participants were told that one of the most important skills in modern time was the ability to type well. Participants were then presented with the same 10 prompts and were instructed to simply retype those prompts in the form fields provided. Thus, while both participants in both conditions engaged in the same sort of typing task, only those participants in the experimental condition were engaging in “Yes, and . . .” improvisational training while participants in the control condition were simply retyping what was already on the screen.

After the “Yes, and . . .” (or control sentence) manipulation, participants completed the “unusual uses” task, a measure of divergent thinking, in which they were told they would be presented with an image of a random product and asked to generate “as many unusual uses for the common object as possible” (Guilford et al., 1960). Participants were explicitly told that ordinary or impossible uses for the product should not be included and were given the example of a paper clip. An unusual use of a paper clip might be “wearing it as an earring,” whereas a use like “holding paper together” or “using it to fly around the world” would represent an ordinary use and impossible use, respectively, and should not be listed. Participants were told they should generate as many uses for the object shown as possible. On clicking the arrow

to proceed to the next page, participants were presented with an image of a brick, an object that has often been used for the creative uses task (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008), and 30 blank form fields for their responses. A count of the number of ideas generated (i.e., fluency) served as one important measure from the task, while the time participants spent completing this task was also surreptitiously captured. Participants could spend as long as they wanted generating responses.

Following the unusual uses task, participants were asked to complete a marketing task in which they were to pretend they were a brand manager for Oreo and to develop a new flavor for the cookie along with an accompanying marketing campaign that would advertise the new cookie to customers. After submitting their first idea, participants were thanked and then presented an identical screen instructing them to come up with yet another flavor and accompanying marketing idea. The purpose of repeating the task was to see if participants were able to generate additional ideas given short notice. After completing this marketing task, participants were asked how easy/difficult (7-point scale: 1 = *extremely difficult*, 7 = *extremely easy*) it was to come up with their first idea and their second idea, which was intended to be a measure of one's perceived self-efficacy.

Finally, participants provided demographic information (e.g., gender and age), assessed their general mood (11-point scale: -5 = *very negative mood*, 5 = *very positive mood*), and indicated how difficulty/easy they find it to collaborate with a group on a project (7-point scale: 1 = *very difficult*, 7 = *very easy*). Following the completion of this section, participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and compensated \$.50 on MTurk.

## Results and Discussion

Familiarity with improvisation followed a normal distribution among participants: 9% were extremely unfamiliar, 24% were unfamiliar, 40% were neither unfamiliar nor familiar, 19% were familiar, and 9% were extremely familiar. Initial analysis of the data revealed correlations between this measure of improv familiarity and the dependent variables of interest. First, although improv familiarity was not significantly correlated with the number of ideas generated during the divergent-thinking task, there was an inverse relationship between level of improv familiarity and the time spent on the task,  $r(260) = -.14, p = .028$ . The correlational design limits interpretation, but one possibility is that participants more familiar with improvisation generated a comparable number of ideas more quickly, as the *total* number of ideas generated did not differ as a function of improv familiarity but the time spent generating the ideas did. The level of improv familiarity was also positively correlated with the perceived ease of collaborating with others on a project,  $r(260) = .22, p < .001$ . Finally, improv familiarity was marginally correlated with the self-efficacy measure associated with completing

the second idea for the Oreo marketing task,  $r(260) = .10, p = .103$ , but not for the first Oreo marketing task ( $p = .327$ ). Although this last correlation did not reach traditional significance, the exploratory nature of this initial study suggests this marginal relationship might deserve a second look in a subsequent, more involved follow-up study.

Of course, one limitation with correlational relationships is that correlations do not imply causality. It may be possible that those people who tend to perceive group collaboration as being easier might also have more knowledge of improvisation or are at least more likely to say they do. To move beyond the limitations of correlational relationships, the "Yes, and . . ." manipulation analysis revealed a significant main effect for the number of ideas generated per minute in the divergent-thinking task. Specifically, participants randomly assigned to the "Yes, and . . ." condition came up with significantly more ideas per minute ( $M = 5.29, SD = 7.32$ ) than participants in the control condition,  $M = 3.88, SD = 2.99; F(1, 258) = 4.22, p = .041, d = .25$ . While the number of ideas generated did not differ between the two groups ( $p = .47$ ), participants randomly assigned to the, "Yes, and . . ." condition took (marginally) less time to generate ideas ( $M = 136.76, SD = 125.28$ ) than control participants,  $M = 171.18, SD = 195.79; F(1, 258) = 2.79, p = .096, d = .21$ . This ratio is consistent with the proposed explanation for the correlational finding for improv familiarity above. Importantly, no significant relationship emerged between mood and the dependent variables or the brief "Yes, and . . ." manipulation, suggesting that differences in mood did not occur and could not explain any results.

By looking for relationships between a general population's familiarity with improvisation and our key dependent variables of interest, the first experiment provides some important initial results linking improv with the skills deemed to be important for modern marketing careers: divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration. Although not perfect and somewhat limited in interpretation due to the nature of correlational relationships, the results of this exploratory study nonetheless provide support that follow-up investigation of these relationships is warranted. Furthermore, the casual relationship between a brief "Yes, and . . ." activity and the ability to generate ideas more quickly on a creative task also support the idea that a longer, more involved manipulation might yield stronger, comparable results for the relevant variables of interest. To test these ideas directly, a follow-up experiment consisting of a 10-week improv comedy training was conducted.

## Experiment 2: Improv Education and Modern Marketing Skills (Student Sample)

Experiment 1 served as an exploratory study revealing that, within the general population, one's familiarity with improv



correlates with several important marketing-related variables—divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration. A short “Yes, and . . .” manipulation also demonstrated an effect on one’s ability to generate ideas quickly in a divergent-thinking task giving further credence to the link between improv, its tenets, and marketing skills. Given the limitations of correlational studies, Experiment 2 manipulates its study conditions so that more causal interpretations can be inferred from the study’s results. Beyond this procedural concern, another goal of the second experiment is to explore whether improvisation taught to students over a longer period of time elicits effects comparable to those found for members of the general population familiar with improvisation or who received a brief improv manipulation. By comparing students studying either improv *or* consumer behavior over the same 10-week period, any relationship between student condition and the outcome variables of interest could bolster the findings of the first experiment with additional causal explanations. Finding evidence of causal relationships between improv training and the outcome variables of interest would have important implications for marketing education and practice.

### Participants and Procedure

A total of 37 undergraduate students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.68$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ; 54% female) from a large Midwestern university volunteered to complete an experiment they were told was a survey exploring idea generation and personality. All participants completed a survey identical to that of Experiment 1 but without the short “Yes, and . . .” manipulation. Instead, participants were sent different links depending on whether they had previously completed a 10-week improvisational course or a 10-week consumer behavior course that took place 4 months before during the prior quarter. A total of 17 students from the improvisational course and 20 students from the consumer behavior course participated in the study. Both courses took place in the same classroom on the same day, one immediately following the next. In addition, both classes were taught by the same instructor, which provides reassurance that any differences between the two groups were due to the difference in content (i.e., improv vs. no improv) and not due to other, extraneous factors. This fortuitous scheduling permitted a rare level of control not often present in most field experiments.

The improv students completed a 10-week course that covered the basic tenets of improvisation—agreement, focusing out (working as a group), playing to the height of one’s intelligence, “Yes, and . . .”—skills that are universally taught at improv comedy training centers (e.g., The Second City, iO, The Annoyance). Over the 10-week course, students were introduced to the improvisational tenets and then led through individual and group activities that reinforced each tenet (e.g., see the appendix). The students in the improv course were randomly assigned to this course as part of a

broader university program that encourages exploring the university’s city through the lens of various topics, and the students were not theatre majors or otherwise self-selected into a course on improvisation. In fact, the students represented a variety of majors—education, nursing, premed, business, and others—and, for most, this was their very first exposure to improvisational comedy. The consumer behavior students completed a 10-week course that covered the basics of consumer behavior—needs, motivation, perception and attention, learning and memory, attitudes and persuasion, social influence, culture and subcultures, valuation, and decision making. The students in the consumer behavior class represented a variety of business majors, as well as majors beyond the business college (e.g., education, biology, psychology, and communications), as the course is required for all business students and popular among nonbusiness students, as well. Both courses included individual assignments, comprehensive group projects (with random group assignment), analytical and critical thinking papers, and quizzes/examinations relevant to the course subject matter, and the two courses were comparable to respect to in-class activities, engagement, participation, and grading. Neither group of students was aware that they would be completing an experiment about improvisation and/or its relationship to marketing skills at any point during their course, as the study was not even conceived until 4 months after the classes had ended. Because of this, any effects obtained could not be due to differences in teaching in preparation for a later study. Importantly, students did not indicate any connection between their prior class experience and the supposed purpose of the “idea generation and personality” survey. Furthermore, any effects obtained would have the additional benefit of demonstrating the enduring outcomes of long-term improvisational training, as data collection occurred 4 full months following the end of the classes.

Per the predictions of the current research, it should be the case that the extensive training in improvisation and its tenets would lead the students from the improv course to outperform the students from the consumer behavior course on the experiment’s tasks, measures designed to capture those skills considered valuable for modern marketing roles. These measures and the survey were identical to those of Experiment 1 with the exception that familiarity with improv and its tenets was captured at the *end* of the survey and no “Yes, and . . .” manipulation was applied to ensure that all effects were due to the 10-week training and not an in-the-moment manipulation. Otherwise, all other questions were identical in type and placement: divergent-thinking task, Oreo task, and demographic information.

### Results and Discussion

To see if improvisational instruction led to important differences for the key variables of interest, participants were coded based on their class participation: consumer behavior

(0) or improvisation (1). The manipulation check revealed that, indeed, the students who had completed the 10-week improv class 4 months prior reported greater familiarity with improvisational comedy ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) than the students who had completed the 10-week consumer behavior class,  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ;  $F(1, 35) = 11.69$ ,  $p = .0016$ ,  $d = 1.15$ .

For the first task, the unusual uses divergent-thinking task, the improvisation students came up with more unusual uses for the brick ( $M = 10.47$ ,  $SD = 7.73$ ) than the consumer behavior students,  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ;  $F(1, 35) = 9.49$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .98$ . Interestingly, although the improv students came up with double the number of unusual uses for the brick than the consumer behavior students, the time spent on the unusual uses task did not differ between the two groups,  $F(1, 35) = 2.57$ ,  $p = .12$ . Thus, in the same amount of time, the improv students came up with twice as many unusual uses for the product than their consumer behavior counterparts, a finding that conceptually replicates the idea-per-minute finding of the first experiment.

For the Oreo flavor task, a marginal difference emerged between the two groups regarding ease/difficulty in developing the initial flavor/advertising campaign,  $F(1, 35) = 3.29$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $d = .59$ , such that the improv students found the task easier ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) than the consumer behavior students ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ); however, the improv students said that developing the second flavor/advertising campaign immediately following their first idea was significantly easier ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ) than the consumer behavior students,  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ;  $F(1, 35) = 7.44$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .89$ . Thus, with respect to the participants' perceived ease of engaging in a marketing task, results suggested that improv students found both tasks easier (directionally) compared with consumer behavior students and that improv students perceived engaging in a second marketing task immediately following the first task significantly easier for them to do relative to the consumer behavior students, suggesting greater self-efficacy on marketing-related tasks. This positive relationship between improv and self-efficacy on a creative marketing task is consistent with the correlational finding from the first exploratory experiment.

With respect to group collaboration, students who had completed the improv course indicated a greater perceived ease with respect to working with others on a group project ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) compared with the consumer behavior students,  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ;  $F(1, 35) = 5.97$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $d = .77$ . As was the case in the first experiment, a positive relationship emerged between improvisation and one's perceptions about group collaboration.

As predicted, students who completed a 10-week course on improvisation provided more ideas in a divergent-thinking task, found generating an additional marketing campaign in the moment easier for them to do, and indicated that working with a group on a project was easier than students who had

completed a 10-week course on consumer behavior. Whereas the first experiment hinted at positive relationships between improv familiarity and the key dependent variables of interest, the follow-up experiment provided greater causal evidence linking improv training with important marketing skills. Furthermore, comparing the correlations from the first study with the effect sizes of the second, it appears that the weak-to-moderate correlations in the initial study pale in comparison with the strong effect sizes found following a longer, more extensive 10-week improv course. Equally as important is the fact that the findings from the second study were observed 4 months after the 10-week course period, thereby suggesting that the effects of long-term improv training may endure well after the training has ended.

In sum, improv students exhibited outcomes that were positive and consistent with those likely necessary for in-the-moment, instantaneous marketing positions. Importantly, the metrics included in the experiment included both *actual* performance and *perceived* performance. That is, the improv students *actually* performed better on the unusual uses divergent-thinking task in the same amount of time compared with the consumer behavior students, and *perceived* completing the follow-up in-the-moment marketing task and group work on a project to be easier. From an educational perspective, this suggests that students' *actual* outcomes and *perceived* outcomes both differ in a positive way for improv-trained students. Importantly, the findings of the second study support the idea that improv and its tenets can be taught and yield the anticipated benefits introduced in Experiment 1 and replicated here in Experiment 2.

## General Discussion

In recent years, both academics and practitioners have recognized the increasing importance of equipping modern marketing students with divergent-thinking skills, greater self-efficacy, and collaboration skills to ensure an ability to respond quickly in a constantly changing environment (Greenacre et al., 2017; Rohm et al., 2018). These skills represent a list of attributes that better position marketing students for success in modern marketing careers: digital marketing, social media marketing, and experiential marketing. Interestingly, these same skills, so important to marketers, are applicable within the context of improvisational comedy and are summarized in the form of "rules" or "tenets" like "Yes, and . . ." and "You are you." Given the importance of these skills in their postcollege marketing careers, it would seem possible that students could be better served if they were to include improv training as part of their business education, yet no empirical data had previously explored this possibility.

In two experiments, one exploring a random sample of the general population and another comparing university students enrolled in a course on improvisation or consumer

behavior, the current research provided evidence of relationships between improv and several skills thought to be essential for modern marketers: divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and collaboration. While modern marketing researchers have recognized greater demands for these “work-ready” skills in an increasingly “digital-first” marketing context, the current studies test whether improv familiarity, a short improv manipulation, and a long-term improv education enhance these skills. Importantly, all three approaches demonstrated evidence linking improv to these important marketing skills, but the long-term improv education proved to be the most effective and enduring, with effects appearing even months after improv training had ended.

Experiment 1 demonstrated initial support for the hypothesized positive relationship between improv and its tenets with several of the skills deemed to be essential for modern marketing roles: divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and collaboration. By relying on a measured account of one’s improv familiarity, the first experiment showed that general relationships between improv and the variables of interest are robust and generally applicable to a wide population, not just people with an extensive background in improv. That said, while familiarity with improv, in general, is positively correlated with some of the anticipated outcome variables, correlational findings are limited in interpretation and scope. Importantly, Experiment 1 also found that a simple “Yes, and . . .” training exercise provided initial evidence of a potential causal relationship between improv familiarity and divergent thinking. This finding, taken together with the general correlational relationships observed between improv familiarity and the outcome measures of interest, supported a follow-up study exploring the potential causal relationships between improv training and the dependent measures.

Experiment 2 replicated the findings of Experiment 1 but moved beyond correlational relationships into causal ones. By comparing a group of students who completed a 10-week improv course with a different group of students who completed a 10-week consumer behavior course during the same time period, Experiment 2 added to the correlational findings from Experiment 1 by revealing causal relationships between improv training and the variables of interest. These findings are not inconsequential: the results from Experiment 2 provided empirical evidence of a 10-week improv course’s effectiveness for enhancing divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and group collaboration, effects that persisted 4 months following the end of the course. Thus, the results suggest that complementing a modern marketing education with improv training may help foster the skills necessary to produce “work-ready” marketing students.

Although neither study is complete unto itself, both studies work in tandem to overcome their respective limitations. For example, although the limitations of class size and potential variability introduced via the longitudinal nature of what amounts to essentially a 10-week manipulation in Experiment

2 are a challenge, the first experiment demonstrated comparable positive effects of improvisation with a very large sample, a more general population (i.e., not just university students), and with a more standardized experience across all subjects. The fact that improv familiarity correlated with divergent thinking, group collaboration, and self-efficacy on a marketing task (marginally) in Experiment 1 encouraged further investigation of the relationship between improvisation and the dependent measures of interest. The causal relationships found in Experiment 2 and the large effect sizes suggest that while quick, one-off improvisational exercises *may* affect marketing-related skills in the moment, long-term training and integration of improvisation into marketing education can have stronger, more enduring effects. Similarly, the current project’s finding that the extent to which one experiences improv training (i.e., a short-term manipulation or a long-term class) may affect the strength and endurance of those positive outcomes may shed some light on the reasons why previous work attempting to link improvisation with measurable business outcomes has led to mixed results. Another potential limitation involves the student samples in Experiment 2. Although consumer behavior tends to attract a diverse mix of students with respect to major and college, and the improv course always has a variety of students, the possibility for a major or college confound exists between the two groups of students studied. The results of Experiment 1 speak against this potential confound, but it is worth keeping in mind that students with a specific major or in a specific college may be more or less prone to group collaboration, divergent thinking, or self-efficacy in the first place. While those differences likely did not explain the observed effects, there could be future opportunities to explore how these characteristics moderate the findings.

Going forward, future research could explore the other tenets of improvisation insofar as they translate to marketing education and practice more directly. Consider, for example, engaging students in short-form improv activities that reinforce listening and then testing responsiveness to customer service encounters. Another activity might reinforce the improv tenet of playing “real” scenes followed by measures capturing consumer preference for marketing stimuli featuring common man endorsers compared with celebrity endorsers. Given that both marketing and improvisation are rooted in having a strong understanding of an audience’s needs and interests, delivering a product that addresses those needs and interests, and then tweaking that offering based on the feedback received from that audience, it is incredibly likely that more parallels between improvisation and marketing will emerge. The current work, initial and exploratory by design, suggests there is more to discover.

Another possible area for future research could involve comparing quick, instantaneous ideas, such as those inspired by the improv tenets herein, to the more methodical, well thought through, research-based ideas to see if and/or when

one source of inspiration outperforms the other. Although the inspiration for the current article derives from modern marketing roles that require quick ideas and decisive action, it could be the case that improv-inspired marketing can elicit ideas that are equally as effective at lower financial and time costs in other domains. Indeed, if market researchers and brand managers have honed their divergent thinking, self-efficacy, and collaboration skills via improvisational training, it could be that they are well positioned to better anticipate their target market's needs and interests before conducting a focus group or analyzing data. While unlikely to be a perfect substitute for tried and true methods, future research can explore how improv training could complement existing marketing tools.

Modern technology allows customers and companies to stay constantly connected via social media, mobile devices, and interactive websites. However, along with these additional opportunities to engage with consumers comes the challenge of creating, designing, and delivering more marketing content in real-time. Dwindling are the days of carefully coordinated campaigns with plenty of time to conduct research, test ideas, and obtain group buy-in. As consumers grow to expect instant interaction and engagement, companies have to deliver, and in order to ensure that organizations have marketers trained for this kind of immediacy, marketing classrooms must integrate curriculum designed to teach these skills. Thankfully, improvisational comedy offers a wellspring of ideas and activities that can better prepare marketing students for the work expected of them in this more immediate, increasingly connected world, and the integration of these ideas into the classroom is as simple as saying, "Yes, and . . ."

## Appendix

### *Improv Activities to Integrate Into the Classroom*

**Yes, And . . . Scenes.** This activity is designed to teach the fundamental rule of improvisation: agreement. When creating a scene, it is important for players to agree for us to get anywhere, as an "improv scene" is really a collaborative effort between two or more actors. This does *not* mean that players may have a difference of opinion from time to time, but in order for our scenes to be interesting and to go anywhere, we have to *agree* on our fictitious reality. In the improv world, the imaginary world we create is *real*, it is *true*, it simply *is*. The moment we deny that world or something about that created world, the illusion falls apart, the audience gets confused, and things become a lot less funny in an awkward standstill. The way the "Yes, And . . ." activity works is simple. First, all players line up against a wall. Then, the two players in the middle come forward. Each scene consists of only two sentences. The first player says anything he or she wants, and the second player responds by

saying a sentence that *must* begin with, "Yes, and . . ." first agreeing with his or her scene partner's suggestion and then contributing something more to it. Once the second person finishes his or her sentence, the scene is over, they return to their respective end of the line, and two new players from the middle come out and start a new two-line scene following the same rules.

**Purpose.** Instilling the notion of group collaboration.

**Freeze Tag.** Freeze Tag is among the most popular and prevalent of improv activities. The rules are simple: after getting a suggestion from the audience, two players start a scene. At some point during that scene, another player on stage who not currently involved in the scene can shout out, "Freeze!" at which point the two players currently acting in the scene freeze in whatever position they happen to be. The person who yelled, "Freeze!" taps one of the frozen players out of the scene and assumes their position. Then, the two frozen players unfreeze and start a new scene from those same positions. A helpful hint for this activity is that standing around in the same position does not provide your troupe with fun times to yell, "Freeze!" Instead, think of all the crazy ways you can move your body in whatever scene you happen to be playing so that your troupe has ample material to yell freeze and to start new, creative scenes.

**Purpose.** To encourage physicality in comedy, to instill the thought of how you can always be giving your scene partners and fellow troupe members "gift" in the spirit of group collaboration.

**Acting Is Reacting.** Too often beginning improvisers live "in their head." That is, they are thinking too much about what they are going to say or do in the future (i.e., in the next few minutes) to be funny, clever, or witty when, in reality, great improv is not about living in the future but rather living in the here and now. In fact, people often say the most important thing in an improv scene is whatever your scene partner just said or did. To play Acting is Reacting, the troupe divides into pairs of two. A setting is given as a suggestion, but then players start conversations with their scene partner with one simple rule: everything you say must incorporate what your scene partner just said or did. So, if your scene partner begins with, "Reggie, I tried a new kale diet last week," you must first reply, "You tried a new kale diet last week? Gross! I cannot live without sugar," to which your scene partner might reply, "Sugar? You're going to turn into sugar. Speaking of, I found out I had a cavity this morning," and so on.

**Purpose.** Teaching people the importance of listening as an essential skill, working in tandem with a scene partner in the spirit of collaboration.

**One-Word Alien.** To play One-Word Alien, three players form a single alien being: one person sits on the floor, one person kneels or stands behind that person, and the third person stands up behind the other two. The rest of the troupe members are meeting the alien for the first time, so one person moderates the conversation between the audience and the alien, specifically asking for questions about the alien's life, history, and existence (e.g., "What do you eat where you are from?"). The only rule is that the alien members can only reply with one word each—any one of the three people can start the reply by saying one word, then play proceeds "up" the alien one word at a time and resets at the bottom. This continues until someone decides he or she has said the last word and the alien droops back to sleep.

**Purpose.** Listening and group collaboration.

**Slides.** Slides involves a host, a photographer, and the rest of the troupe striking poses to be explained by the photographer. The activity begins with the host welcoming the photographer who introduces himself or herself to the audience. There may also be the usual "talk show banter"—asking the photographer about his or her life, hobbies, upbringing, and so on. The host explains that the photographer will be sharing some of his or her work today. During this time, the other players are striking a pose on the other side of the stage and then freezing in place. Once frozen, it is the job of the photographer to explain what the image is depicting. Often, the photographer can incorporate personal photos with professional photos and sometimes can incorporate well-known celebrities into the mix to keep things interesting.

**Purpose.** Slides incorporates listening skills in addition to nonverbal communication skills among group members to the group's collaborative benefit.

**Ba Dum, Ba Dum.** This activity is a rhythmic one that encourages players to think "on the fly," as they have *no* idea what the prior player is going to say. The activity begins with everyone sitting in a circle patting their legs twice then clapping twice in a consistent rhythm. Then, one person starts the song by saying the beginning of a famous phrase, lyric, or otherwise well-known statement. For example, someone might say, "The grass is greener . . ." Then, the player to that person's right would finish (in rhythm) with, ". . . on the other side." Then *everyone* says together, "The grass is greener on the other side, ba dum, ba dum." The player who just finished the statement with ". . . on the other side," then starts his or her own new statement. This is repeated around the circle with the rhythm gradually getting faster.

**Note.** It is not required to finish a statement with the accurate ending. Sometimes players will not know a quotation or will have a momentary lapse in memory. This is okay!

Say anything. It would be just as acceptable if the player responded, ". . . but the sky is blue!" Sometimes themes emerge as the rhythm goes around the circle, but themes are not necessary.

**Purpose.** Getting players to be able to think of multiple ideas in the moment.

**Take It Back.** In this activity, two players start a scene and, at any point, a third player can clap his or her hands. When this person claps his or her hands, the person who just said the most recent line of dialogue must "take it back" and provide a new line of dialogue in its place. For example, if someone said, "I can't wait to go home to see my pet cat," and someone clapped, that person would have to swap out the end of the sentence with a new choice: "I can't wait to go home to see my pet dog." Someone may clap again, so the person would have to find yet another alternative: "I can't wait to go home and pet my stomach after overeating."

**Purpose.** To foster divergent-thinking skills and the ability to generate a lot of ideas very quickly.

**Song Circle.** A group forms a circle and then one member of the group jumps into the middle of the circle. The person in the middle starts singing any song she or he wants and then, soon after, someone else from the group will jump into the center of the group singing a song lyric that is a continuation of, inspired by, or thematically related to the song that was just being sung in the circle.

**Purpose.** To think creatively with respect to theme and to generate lots of possible ideas and extensions in a dynamic way as a song progresses and/or changes to a different song.

**Objection!** In Objection! the audience provides a suggestion of an object, a person, or a place. Once that suggestion has been obtained, one of the players runs to the front of the stage with a strong opinion inspired by the suggestion. That player keeps providing his or her opinion until another player from the lineup in the back yells, "Objection!" and then provides a reason for his or her objection. If the director feels like that objection is a valid (or fun) point, then that person takes center stage and continues his or her opinion and justification of that opinion. If the director denies the objection, the player already at the center of the stage must keep going until another player objects and gives a reason that the director agrees is worthy. Typically, the activity picks up its pace as it proceeds, with final objections near the end firing off. The last player left standing is the "winner."

**Purpose.** Objection helps teach improvisers to be confident in his or her opinions and encourages them to take a risk with the belief that their "Objection" may very well be good enough each time.

**Conducted Story.** Conducted Story can involve the entire troupe or a subset of players. In this activity, one person is designated as the “conductor.” The other players playing along stand in a semicircle around the conductor facing the audience. The conductor gets the suggestion of a name and an item from the audience. From there, the conductor tells the audience that they are about to hear the story of [name and item]. The conductor points to one of the players in the semicircle who begins the story with “Once upon a time . . .” That player proceeds to tell the story until the conductor points to someone else who then picks up from where the prior player left off. This happens for a while until the conductor decides that there needs to be a jump in time. He or she addresses the audience and says, “And so was the first chapter of [name and item]. We now fast forward to the middle of the story, Chapter [insert number here] to hear about the further exploits of [name and item].” The activity proceeds as before. The conductor can jump forward as many times as he or she wants and/or to the end of the book. At the very end of the game, the conductor will say something, “So the moral of the story is . . .” and then proceed to either (a) go down the line of players with each person being allowed to say one word or (b) points to a few people as before who can give complete statements to wrap up the game.

**Purpose.** From listening to being ready, Conducted Story is about feeling as if you are always ready to go, able and willing to perform without any fear of failure when called on.

**ABC.** In ABC, three or four players will get the name of an audience member and then use the first letter of that person’s name to start the game. One the letter is obtained, the scene must begin with a word that starts with that letter. For example, if the name is Henry, the first sentence could be, “How in the world am I going to pass this test?” or “Hold on to your hat, Susie!” but could not be “Just wait a second,” or, “I have to go to the bathroom” (because those sentences do not begin with H). Once a player has said his or her sentence, one of the other players must say something *that begins with the next letter of the alphabet*. So, if the first person said, “Hold on to your hat, Susie!” the next person could say something like, “It looks like the storm is going to arrive any minute with these crazy winds!” Then, another player would proceed with J and might say, “Jeepers creepers! I’m terrified of thunderstorms . . . ever since I watched The Wizard of Oz,” and so on until players get all the way back to G in the alphabet, which is the letter that will begin the final sentence of the scene.

**Purpose.** This activity helps players with listening, keeping focus, and simply believing that one can and will get through the challenge.

**1-3-7.** In 1-3-7, three players are assigned either 1, 3, or 7, which corresponds to the number of words they must say

each time they speak in their scene; no more, no less. Typically, improvisers panic at the thought of feeling constrained with respect to their word choice and number of words. For many, having to speak and count the words you say simultaneously feels too daunting to even try. However, 1-3-7 pushes people beyond what *think* they are capable of doing and winds up being hilarious as people become more and more comfortable with their required number of words.

**Purpose.** This activity reminds players that they are able to engage in even the most daunting tasks after initially feeling skeptical or anxious about doing so; people change and get more self-confidence, and this activity is a nice reminder of that.

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