

Chapter 27

Bringing Life to Online Meetings: Using Improv to Enhance Virtual Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The future of work and learning will take place in two-dimensional, online settings, even if these virtual formats are used to augment in-person experiences. In this chapter, the author reflects on his improv theater and teaching experiences to offer practical advice on enhancing collaboration in small, synchronous online meetings, both in the classroom and workplace. Core principles include engaging selflessly, honoring the power of empty space, and bringing emotional and physical energy to each online session. The author shares lively examples from his own theatrical experience and supports the use of basic improv principles through social science, neuroscience, and workplace engagement research.

INTRODUCTION

Uncomfortable pauses. Voices speaking over each other. A collective awareness that, at heart, the endeavor is fundamentally absurd. Many of the perils of improvisational (“improv”) theater are also inherent to small group meetings in a synchronous, online environment.

Collaboration over the Internet, where three-dimensional beings transmute themselves into ones and zeroes, then back to poor facsimiles of living creatures, is as strange as delivering a complex narrative without the aid of a script. When performed without training or shared rules of behavior, both enterprises can devolve into a hopeless mess.

But with sufficient levels of focus, trust, and energy, even amateur improv shows can approach the sublime. The same holds true for small classes and workplace meetings in a virtual forum. These relatively novel events can learn a great deal from the older art of improv.

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Bringing Life to Online Meetings

The author has taught, managed teams, and been managed by others in an online setting for more than a decade. He has suffered the blank stares of bored, browsing students and the yawns of managers idly typing while reciting performance reviews. He has trudged through Zoom meetings dominated by those unaware of the “mute” button. And he has performed improv comedy (often poorly) for the last fifteen years, beginning with an upstart college group and culminating in amateur participation at Chicago’s Second City.

Using tales from these experiences, bolstered by research into workplace and classroom behavior, this chapter will cover three key concepts. First, the chapter will offer a definition of improv and share a brief history of the craft’s use in academic and business settings. Next, the chapter will give an overview of core improv principles, including interacting selflessly and taking advantage of empty space, that can be applied to synchronous online meetings. Finally, the chapter will give an overview of the potential benefits and detriments of improv-driven collaboration.

BACKGROUND

It’s tempting to associate improv with non-stop laughter. Or at least a handful of guffaws. But quality improv reveals an array of emotions, and most laughter is generated from unexpected discoveries within a realistic scene. To arrive at a laugh, the ensemble must first create a world recognizable to the audience. This requires the creation of characters with tangible relationships (Madson, 2005). These links are often mundane – think mothers and daughters. Or doctors and patients. Most everyday conversations, at heart, are lively exercises in improvisation.

Improv is best defined in opposition to another type of performance: Stand-up comedy. The author has spent time in both worlds, and his few years in stand-up comedy remain a harrowing memory of self-loathing and isolation. The stand-up comic recites the same joke or story for months, refining each pause and mannerism, in a desperate act to preserve the oral history of a culture of one. Improv, however, requires a collective effort. Stand-up is a monologue; improv is a symphony.

Amid the eccentric world of improv, participants are often divided over the appellations of “theater” versus “comedy.” The former adds an air of intrigue to an otherwise silly event. The latter, alas, is easier to market to paying audiences. We’ll define improv here as unscripted theater, in which small groups of performers create scenes, settings, and characters from scratch. Improv, too, can be performed in front of an audience or in a living room among friends. No tickets required.

And if the notion of unscripted acting sounds terrifying, it’s not! When performed with supportive teammates, it can be a source of great joy. The author has performed amateur improv for a decade and a half, and there is nothing more thrilling than introducing new participants to the medium. In its simplest form, known as “short form” improv, performers act within small, defined games that offer scaffolding for each scene. The television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* offer countless examples of “short form” exercises.

In its most advanced iteration, “long form” improv features an hour-long, seamless narrative with multiple settings. The recent Netflix series *Middleditch and Schwartz* offers an example of this niche art. The author once witnessed a group of eight performers sit on stools, turn off all the lights in the theater, ask the audience to close their eyes, and use their voices to create an improvised dramatic play. Settings shifted through song. Elaborate sound effects were created with voices and hands. It was remarkable. But improv needn’t be this complex.

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